

JOHN HELM

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: August 4, 2004

Copyright 2005 ADST

Q: Today is the 4th of August 2004. This is an interview with John Helm, being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy.

When and where were you born?

HELM: I was born in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, December 19th, 1950.

Q: Did the place glow at that time, or not?

HELM: Well Oak Ridge was an interesting little town, where they made the atomic bomb. My father was the first civilian doctor in Oak Ridge. He was in the Pacific, in the Navy, and he was from that area of east Tennessee and was recruited to come there and open a hospital. Within the atomic plant they had this big hospital, but only the employees could go there. Their families could not. So he opened a small clinic which later became the Oak Ridge Hospital, and did primarily pediatrics and ob/gyn for the families of the men that worked in the nuclear plant. My mother hated it. The town was built out of basically plywood shacks that had been built very hurriedly during the war. Everything was drafty, everything leaked. She had to go through three machine gun checkpoints between house and the grocery store, for example.

Q: Tell me about the Helm side, where did they come from?

HELM: Well, one genealogist in the family has traced them back to Fauquier County, Virginia. They were a group of people that moved into the mountains of Virginia and through the late 1700s into the 1800s moved south. My father was born in White Pine, Tennessee which is northeast of Knoxville. He went to college at Carson-Newman in Jefferson City, Tennessee which is in the same county, and then was able to get into Vanderbilt Medical School. He funded medical school by joining the Navy and getting a Naval Scholarship and the Navy paid for his medical school. Upon graduation from Med. school he did his internship at the naval hospital in Norfolk - all this was before the second world war, so that when the war started he was already in the Navy.

Q: Where'd he go in the Navy?

HELM: Well, he started out by becoming a flight physician. He went to Pensacola and became a pilot. Then he was stationed in Washington for a while. He went around to all of the universities in the area doing flight physicals for aviation commissions. Places like VMI (Virginia Military Institute), and University of Virginia. Then he was transferred to a coal-fired aircraft carrier on Lake Michigan, the Wolverine.

Q: This was an old paddle wheeler, wasn't it?

HELM: He was the doctor on that ship.

Q: That was a very famous ship

HELM: And it was really a do-nothing job for him because the flight physician takes care of the pilots. And either the pilot makes it, or the pilot goes into Lake Michigan, but they very seldom come in injured. So what he mainly did was censor mail and help out with whatever jobs needed to be done.

Q: Where'd your mother's family come from?

HELM: My mother's family is from Nashville, Tennessee. I don't know if you're acquainted with Martha White Flour. Each sack has a picture of the little girl on it. The little girl is my great aunt. She raised my mother after my grandmother died in the flu epidemic in 1919. My mother went to Vanderbilt, and that's where my parents met. My father was in flight school in Pensacola in December 1941 and got a 72-hour pass over Christmas. He drove to Nashville, got married on December 26th, and drove back to Pensacola. Later, after flight school, he was on the Wolverine, from there he went to the Yorktown. This is the second Yorktown, not the one that was sunk

Q: One of the Essex carriers.

HELM: Yes. He spent the rest of the war out in the Pacific. For a while he was assigned to a marine group on some island, but most of the time he was on the carrier. After the war ended, his carrier was one of the ones that stayed in Japan, in Yokohama harbor, for probably six months. His ship was one of the last to come home. My mother took the train to San Francisco to meet him when his ship finally got home. He reported to the Naval Base in and requested immediate discharge from the Navy. The Navy said, "No, no, we can't let you out of the Navy here. You have to go to the place nearest your home, get and discharged there." So he traveled to Memphis, to the Naval Medical station in Memphis, and requested discharge. They said, "No, no, we can't discharge you until you go see the commander." He visited the Commanding Officer and that officer said "I'm so happy to see you. I've been wanting out, too. You're now the commander of the medical station, and I'm getting out." It took him about a year to find another poor fellow he could do the same thing to. Because he'd been in the Navy, was an East Tennessee native, and still had security clearances he was offered a job as the first civilian doctor in Oak Ridge.

Q: How long was he at Oak Ridge?

HELM: Say, '47 to 51.

Q: So although you were born there you never really lived there -

HELM: I was a very small baby there. It's an interesting story, that's it.

Q: Where did your family go?

HELM: We moved to Columbia, Tennessee. That's really where I grew up. Its in middle Tennessee, half way between Nashville and the Alabama line.

Q: Well now what was Columbia like when you were a kid?

HELM: It was a very small town. Mainly agricultural. It also had a lot of industry. There were phosphate deposits, phosphate mining, and they made phosphoric acid. I grew up in a semi-rural area, the child of the doctor. We didn't actually farm, but we had eleven acres that we had to take care of, and that sort of thing.

Q: What years were you there?

HELM: 1951 until I joined the Foreign Service.

Q: I take it you went to school there?

HELM: Yes.

Q: What was the school like? Let's take the elementary school first.

HELM: The elementary school was McDowell Elementary. It was your classic two-story brick school. What else can I say? It had a big playground.

Q: How many students, about?

HELM: I would guess about 400, maybe.

Q: So it was not a one-room schoolhouse.

HELM: It was a town school with a two-story building. It had a gym. I didn't do well there. I had problems there.

Q: You were solitary, a reader, having too much fun somewhere else?

HELM: Okay - I was a reader, but I couldn't write. My whole life I've had problems with writing. Anyway, when I finished the third grade the teachers, the principal, and my parents decided what I should really do is go to the local military academy. So I was moved from the third grade, which I failed, straight into the fifth grade at a military academy. I wore a uniform and marched and did all those things. They kept me in the fifth grade for two years. I passed the fifth grade the next year. I don't know what was wrong with me, but I did okay in the military school.

Q: You look at kids, and some kids just breeze through, other kids just never make it, but most sort of go through bumps.

HELM: Well, anyway, I got out of that and in seventh grade they enrolled me in the public junior high school, so I didn't have to go back to the same elementary school.

Q: In that part of Tennessee, was the war in capital letters still an issue or not. I'm curious about how we want to put it: the War of Rebellion, the Civil war, the War for Southern Independence.

HELM: Very much so. To some extent, still is. Oh, yes. And this was before the days of integration. This was a period just before integration. So I graduated from high school in the spring of '69.

Q: How did that part of Tennessee fit during the Civil War?

HELM: Middle Tennessee was solidly Confederate. It was an area of large plantations. James K. Polk is from Columbia. The Polk brothers had huge plantations. Their houses are still there.

Q: Leonidas was a bishop, I guess. [Leonidas Polk, Episcopal Missionary Bishop of Southwest, built St. John's Church in Columbia, Tennessee.]

HELM: His house, his church are still there. It was an area where slavery was economically viable. They raised primarily tobacco. A little bit north for cotton. A lot of pigs, a lot of ham processing, a lot of food production. Very rich area. Columbia is on the Duck River, and there had intended to be a battle of Columbia. Both sides were trying to get set for this battle of Columbia and the Confederates thought they had the Yankees in the bag. The Yankees slipped out overnight through the Confederates, at a place called Springhill. And then moved north and they had a big battle in Franklin, and later one in Nashville. So they never actually had a battle there.

Q: Where you came from, you were not part of what was called the mountain culture?

HELM: That was my father's culture. Where I was raised and grew up was strictly middle Tennessee, and it was just understood that the Confederates really won. We hardly celebrated Abraham Lincoln's birthday, but we did celebrate Robert E. Lee's. Q: While you were there, starting in '55, there were the civil rights movements. Did integration hit your area while you were there in school?

HELM: The whole civil rights movement was ignored in my town, except for two main things. My town in 1946 had one of the very first race riots. It made all the papers. In fact, Eleanor Roosevelt was involved and H.L. Mencken from Baltimore came to report on it, Harry Truman sent in the National Guard.

(I told a long story but it was not my story, I was not a participant...so I have removed it from this document. I recently found a book, No more Social Lynchings by Robert W. Ikard - the author's mother was my 8th grade music teacher. Great book, great story, but not MY story - JH).

The second issue occurred when I was a freshman in college, the year after I graduated from high school. In my town there was a new white high school that had just been built a couple of years earlier. It was very nice. And there was a black high school. And it was really old and decrepit. The whites got new books; the blacks got nothing. The black leadership had been unsuccessfully petitioning the school board for a new black high school under the separate but equal doctrine. Others in the black community, who were more attuned to the civil rights movement, wanted to send the black children to the white high school and integrate the white high school. It was the only white high school in the town. The night before school started, the black high school burned to the ground. Total loss. It was a firetrap. And so they integrated the schools, just like that.

Q: Did you feel any of this? (NOTE: I have had to remove this story because too many of the people involved are still alive and would not want it published on the internet - JWH)

Q: Did you have brothers and sisters?

HELM: Oh yes. Yes, I had one brother and two sisters.

Q: As kids, did you play with the black children at all?

HELM: No. Different parts of town, different everything. You didn't play with the black children.

Q: After you got out of military school, by the time you got to junior high, did you settle down?

HELM: Oh no. I somehow always had trouble with school. I failed ninth grade. They made me repeat that. I crawled out of high school somewhere in the bottom quarter of my high school class. But I had a C average, and in Tennessee, if you had a C average, you could go to a state school. So I got into Memphis State University, went down there, and basically partied for my freshman year. Hated the place. Absolutely hated the place.

Q: What was wrong with it?

HELM: There were a couple of things. The first was that Martin Luther King was killed in Memphis in the spring of '68. There had been major riots at that time, but then there were recurrent bad blood. You could feel it on the campus. So by the fall of '69, it was not a happy campus. State schools had been integrated and the blacks had come to the school and had made a symbolic presence, really. But more than that, they partially wanted to express their right to go to school, and partially wanted to go to school. It was just a lot of bad blood, a lot of bad vibes in town. It's a party school, a commuter school. I was living in one of the few dorms. I hated Memphis.

Q: Well then what did you do? Did you stay there?

HELM: I got a job that summer working at a YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) camp as a counselor. When I went home after doing that for most of the summer, I was talking to my father and just said I really hated Memphis. I just didn't like it. I remember my mother looked at me and said, "You know you don't have to go back. There's options." And I'd been dreading going back. My father said, "All right, I'll take you up to east Tennessee, to Carson-Newman, and see if they'll let you in there." Well I hadn't done very well academically and there was some question as to whether I could try and do this. But he had connections, so he went to Carson-Newman, he got me in there. While I was there I guess I matured a little bit, knuckled down and actually did some studying, and graduated. Not with honors or anything, but fairly well.

Q: What were your favorite subjects?

HELM: History major. History, a little political science. A great deal of my life was spent on or around the tractor, or a lawnmower, or an old car. Pretty handy, mechanically; I can fix things. I'm pretty practical. Even in those days, I was a pretty practical guy that I could make things. To this day I'm pretty good with that sort of thing. I minored in education. In the autumn of 1972 I did a semester of student teaching at Morristown West High School.

Q: Morristown, Tennessee?

HELM: It's ten miles up the road. It was a rough school in a mountain town. I did well at student teaching, but I wasn't happy doing it. Maybe there just wasn't enough age separation between the students and me. Maybe it was the fact that I was probably the only person in the classroom that wasn't armed in one way or another. I always felt outgunned there, and truly probably was.

After completion of twelve weeks of student teaching there was a mandatory interview with the Dean of the Education Department at the College. At that meeting I said something like "This was great experience, and I think I've learned a lot, and it was good for me to do this, but I'm never going to teach." I never sent ten dollars to the Tennessee Board of Education and I never got a Tennessee teaching certificate, even though I had earned it. After that interview, I stepped out of the Dean's office, and said to myself, "Boy, John, you really screwed your life now. You've trained for four years to be a teacher, and now you're not going to be a teacher. What the hell are you going to do with your life?"

There was a bulletin board on a nearby wall with posters with tear-off cards: join the Army, join the Navy, join the Marines, join the Foreign Service. I tore off and mailed the foreign service card, because I figured that at that military school, I'd done enough military sorts of things for one lifetime. The Foreign Service mailed me a package of forms and instructed me to go to the downtown Knoxville post office on the first Saturday in December and take the Foreign Service exam. And I said, "Hell, I'm not doing anything better that day, I'll go do it". I went and took the Foreign Service exam. I guess I'm just dumb and naïve. First, I didn't have any clue what the Foreign Service did, but it looked like a job and I needed a job and second, I was too dumb to know I couldn't pass it. So I passed the damn thing.

There were two of us from Carson-Newman in a room with maybe 200 people taking the exam. The two of us were the only ones (other than the exam proctor) wearing coats and ties. I listened to the people around me talking, they were all graduate students or even Faculty from the University of Tennessee. They seemed so educated and so smart that I was intimidated. The multiple-choice part of the exam lasted all morning then we had a lunch break and returned to write an essay in the afternoon. Many people turned in their papers early and left before lunch. I stayed with it until the Proctor instructed us to stop. At the start almost every seat was taken. After lunch there were enough empty seats for us to be spaced out on alternate rows. Throughout my career I looked for people from Tennessee. I especially looked for people who might have taken the exam with me, but I never found anyone. I think that I am the only person from Tennessee to enter the Foreign Service that year.

Q: Had the outside world intruded much on you? International affairs, anything like that?

HELM: Yes, in one sense. My father, through the Baptist Church, got involved with the smallpox eradication program and made a number of trips, usually two to three weeks, to various parts of South America vaccinating against smallpox. He took me along to Costa Rica. I went to Costa Rica when I was in high school. We vaccinated all day long, every day, as many people, as fast as they could walk past. We used the jet injectors, like a gun, you just shoot'em as quick as they can go by. Then you want to get out of town before their arm starts to hurt. (Laughter). You go to a village, vaccinate everybody in the village, go to the next village, spend the night, get up the next day, vaccinate everybody in that village, and go on to the next village. That was my only foreign experience.

Q: I assume then you took the oral exam?

HELM: Yes.

Q: Usually the questions often center around interest in foreign affairs. How did that work for you?

HELM: Well, it was a strange interview. In those days, you checked a box and said you wanted to be an admin officer. I didn't want to be a political officer, I didn't want to be econ, I didn't know what consular was. I knew what admin was. So I had this oral exam, and they started asking me questions about foreign policy and that sort of thing. I said, "No, no, no, no. I really don't know much about that, but I can fix things. I can make things work. That's what I really do. Do you need anybody in the Foreign Service that can do practical sorts of things?" And so they redirected their questions more to that area. And my career was in the General Services field. I spent my whole career either fixing things or directing other people on fixing things, or logistics, supply or procurement. I was successful at it.

Q: Did you come right into the Foreign Service?

HELM: I finished up in college in December of '72. If you'll notice, I started in the fall of '69, so despite blowing off my freshman year I still finished college in three and a half years. I came to Washington in early January of '73. They had told me I was going to have the orals in Washington. I had a sister living in Arlington. I could live in her attic. I came here and got a job working in Olney, Maryland for a company that composted leaves, packed compost into sacks, and sold it at Dart drug stores. I had the exalted job of operating a forklift, stacking bags on pallets, cleaning up their factory, running a front end loader, and fixing things. I got cleaned up one day and drove to Roslyn for the oral exam and afterwards went back to work at the factory.

Some time after that, it had been very rainy and the compost would get very soggy, get very heavy; and hard to work. Since we sold it by weight, 50 pounds of wet compost would not fill the plastic bag, so we had to dry it. This was a real lash-up of a factory. It was made out of four by fours and plastic sheeting out in the middle of a field. There was a rough gravel road in which turned to mud in wet weather. That's where we would dry the dirt. We'd lay it out there in a layer about six inches deep all the way up to the main highway. As we needed it, we would pick it up and put it in the bags.

Most of the people working there were working there because they couldn't get a job at the post office because they'd been busted for narcotics or something. It was minimum wage, and it wasn't exactly glamorous work.

One day a Government car - you can always tell the government cars - came flying down our road, probably 40 miles an hour, and steered right into the middle of six inches of soggy compost. It must have gotten 60, 70 feet before it finally sank into the muck. A man got out of the car and sinking above his ankles, slogged his way over to the factory. He was wearing a beautiful suit, shined shoes, and a hat, at least it was beautiful before he walked through the mud. Upon arrival at the factory he pulled out a leather badge holder and identified himself as a Federal Security Officer to the first employee that he reached...that employee was on probation for a narcotics charge. The employee yelled "NARC" and everyone in the building ran in panic to hide in the dirt piles. I was probably the only guy working at the factory that wasn't involved in narcotics. They were all into marijuana.

I was on the front-end loader out in the field. The boss waved to me, and I came back in. The Federal Agent asked if there was someplace we could go talk? All we had was the plant and an old semi-trailer where the boss had a desk and one chair. There was no place to talk, so he said, "Let's go sit in my car." We to his car and he asked me all the usual DS (Diplomatic Security) questions required for a security interview. I guess I gave the right answers and signed some forms that he needed for his security interview.

When we were done, he asked, "Can you help me get out of here, cause I'm stuck"? I said, "Oh sure, no problem, I'll just get the front end loader and push you back up to the main road, and you can take off." That's what I did. He was happy, and I pushed him up to the main road, and he backed the car up once he got traction. However, as he drove away I noticed that the front bumper was about 45 degrees off of level. Bent the hell out of the front end of the car, and he, inside the car, had no idea that I had just torn up this car. (Laughter). There's no way I could have passed that interview after the compost ruined the guy's shoes and then I ruined his car. And away he went. But they let me in. They made me a job offer, and I joined the Foreign Service.

Q: What was your training when you came in?

HELM: We had the usual junior officer course (A-100). It was supposed to be about a year. It was going to be an eight-weeks of basic officer training, and then a six or eight week of specialized functional training, and then you were supposed to get language training. That was the agreed upon thing. I finished the eight weeks of basic training. At the end of basic training they gave you your assignment. The last week of basic training, the Course Director, Nick Baskey, came in and said, "Excuse me, is there anyone in this room that doesn't have a lease in the Washington area?" Everybody had been told they would be there for a year and they could sign a one-year lease. I didn't have any money, so I couldn't afford a lease, but I could live in my sister's attic. So that's where I was living. I held up my hand and said, "I don't have a lease." They said thank you very much and walked out. I had no idea what that was about.

On the last day of the course there would be a party, assignments day, and everyone would be told their assignment. I was the youngest person in the class. I was 22 years old, and I guess the class average was close to 30. So I was dispatched to go to Eagle Liquors and buy a bottle of alcohol to give to whoever was going to be the recipient of the "worst" assignment. I went over to Eagle Liquors and bought a bottle of Jack Daniels and came back. We had the ceremony and they gave out the assignments, where each of us was to go for our first tour of duty. This one's going to Paris and that one's going to London, etc. It came to me they announced that I was to go to Banjul. "Banjul?"

There was a large map on the wall. I asked the "honored distinguished visitor" (some important person from the Director General's office who had given an appropriate speech) if he'd be so kind as to point out Banjul on the map. I'd never heard of this place. He was a senior officer, I forget who he was, but obviously somebody of importance. He very grandly turned to the map and pointed to Africa and said, "It's not here. Where is it?" And he turned to another experienced senior officer ... "Where's this Banjul?" "Isn't it on there?" "No, it's not here." By this time the whole crowd was standing in front of the map. Nobody, none of these Foreign Service people, could find Banjul on the map of the world. It was an old map. Banjul had changed its name. It had formerly been called Bathurst and Bathurst was on the map but they could not find Banjul. Anyway, I got to keep the bottle of whiskey.

And then they said to me, "Oh, by the way, we need you there right now." I said, "Well, what about the rest of my training?" They said, "We'll do that when you get back." There were a few things that had to be taken care of first, so I couldn't go right away. They put me in the Admin Officers course, and then pulled me out of the course about half way through to send me to post.

I started checking out of the Department. In the Foreign Service Lounge they handed me a four page list and you have to go to various offices to check out. One of the places on my checkout list was the office of Communications. When I went to the Office of Communications they said, "You can't go yet." "Why not?" "Well you're going to be the communicator, and you haven't had communications training." I returned to FSI and told the course instructor that I couldn't go because I hadn't had communications training. They immediately stuck me into a Communications training course. There was a great big gray teletype machine that they trained me to operate then to service. I knew how to care for the machine, to change the ribbons, paper, & punch-tape, adjust it, and clean it. It was an encryption-decryption teletype. I took the whole 6 week course in one week. I got the hurry-up special.

On the last day, the Teletype Instructor asked "where'd you say you were going?" I said, "I'm going to Banjul." He then said "We trained you on this machine." I said, "Well, yeah." "We have a problem Banjul doesn't have one of these." "Oh, okay, what does Banjul have?" And he pulled out a little stenotype machine that had been modified by NSA to be a crypto machine, and it was the worst piece of junk you ever saw. It was manual; it didn't use electricity. It made little brown spots on a piece of paper, and you had to look at the letters under the brown spots and try to figure out what the word was. They trained me on that in about ten minutes, and said, "Okay, you can go to post now."

Another office on the check-out list was the Medical Office. I got to medical and said, "Look, I just had a physical before I came into the Foreign Service, a couple of months ago". Why do I need another physical?" The doctor said, "You're right, you don't need another physical, but we want to check your teeth. You didn't get your dental checkup." They put me in a dental chair and they said, "Oh. You have wisdom teeth. All these wisdom teeth have to come out before you can go to post." So I said, when am I supposed to get my wisdom teeth out? So I went back to see the junior officer personnel guy and said, "I have to get my wisdom teeth out. Do I get any leave before I go overseas?" And he said "We'll give you a week's leave if you'll get your wisdom teeth taken care of during the week." So I went back to Tennessee, got my wisdom teeth out all in one day, and was in absolute misery when I finally left for Banjul via Paris.

I was sent to Paris because I was to be the cashier at the post and they had to give me two days of cashier training. Then I flew to Dakar and I had a day of consultation in Dakar. I was at the Embassy and I went to see various people there. One of the people I went to see was the consul, Jim Blanford, and he said "You know you're going to be the Consular officer at that post." I said, "No, I didn't know that. What does a Consul do?" "Well, a consul issues visas and helps American citizens". I said, "How do you do that?" He said, "You take the passport, bend it this way, put it in this machine, pull this handle and you write this down over here, and that's how you issue a visa." "Oh, okay." "You don't issue passports so I don't have to show you how to do that." "Okay, alright, I guess." Then he said, "There's a book called 7 FAM, (Foreign Affairs Manual) and when you get there, read that. There's an Immigration Act. You might want to read that." So off I flew to Banjul to be Admin officer, Consular officer, I found out I was also the USIA (United States Information Agency) officer in charge of the library and a reading room with one employee.

Q: What was the country?

HELM: The Gambia. Formerly called, The River Gambia Colony. The Gambia's a nice country, 20 miles wide, 200 miles long, half underwater at high tide. It had been a British colony. People are generally friendly. Gambia had a couple of interesting things going for it. First, it has a beautiful beach. It's only 20 miles wide, but the whole 20 miles is a beautiful beach. The Gambia river bisects the country. The town of Banjul is at the mouth of the river. For the ten miles south of the river, there's a solid line of resort hotels built by the Swedes. The Swedes would fly to Gambia, play naked on the beach for a week, and fly back to Sweden. For a young fellow, there's a certain attraction. (Laughter) It seemed to attract a lot of the younger Swedish women. There's no sunlight in Sweden in the winter; they can come to Banjul and get sun.

Q: Who was the ambassador when you were there?

HELM: The ambassador was O. Rudolph Aggrey. I met him when I went through Dakar on the way into post, and then once during my tour he came down for a weekend. But the chargé^{1/2} d'affaires, (the permanent chargé^{1/2}) was Jim McFarland. He spent his whole career as a political specialist in Germany and Austria, and previously decided to retire, and then changed his mind. He'd gone to Personnel and said, "I've changed my mind, I don't want to retire. Do you think you can find an assignment for me someplace?" "Certainly, we have a job for you." Thus he became Chargé^{1/2} in Banjul. His wife was on the books as the secretary. And then there was me. We had one office FSN (Foreign Service National), Ibrahima Jatta. We had a driver, caretaker/night watchman, and the USIA Librarian.

Q: You were there from when to when?

HELM: I was in Banjul from early November (1973) until December 23rd 1974. I was only there about 13 months.

Q: What was going on in the Gambia at that time?

HELM: Absolutely nothing. Well let me back up. The Gambia was a very small impoverished country in West Africa. At the time we didn't really have an AID program. The country grew peanuts and had a peanut mill, and it exported peanuts. The country, at a very low economic level, was self-sustaining. There was no great starvation. They could grow enough food. They lived fairly well in the traditional African way of life. Folks were generally happy. Politically, the president of the country had been prime ministethat's another story.

The Brits had the colony, and they weren't making any money off of the Gambia colony. They hadn't made any money for a long time (since the slave trade was abolished). It had been established in the 1700s in competition with the French in Senegal. But the colonial power hadn't really developed it. Nothing much had come of it. During the '60s, the UN (United Nations) was forcing the colonial powers to divest themselves of their colonies. Gambia didn't want to be divested. People there understood that the Brits were a benign master and poured more money into the colony than they took out.

The Brits, on their part, searched the world for college educated Gambians, and only found a couple of them, none of them in Gambia. In fact there were relatively few high school educated Gambians. But they found a Veterinarian in Jamaica who was Gambian. He had a college education. They asked him to become the prime minister of Gambia. At the time he was married to a Jamaican (Christian) lady. He divorced her, went to Gambia, took on the Islamic religion and married two women. At the time of independence, he went from being the Permanent Secretary to Prime Minister to President. He was the guy that ran the country for years. I'll think of the name in a second: Jawara. I couldn't begin to tell you his first name. [On April 24, 1970, The Gambia became a republic following a referendum. Until a military coup in July 1994, The Gambia was led by President Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara, who was re-elected five times. From www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5459.htm]

He was an interesting guy. The way The Gambia worked while I was there, the British High Commissioner ran the foreign policy for the country. He "advised" the president on what to do, and we advised the president on various aspects of foreign policy. Gambia had a vote in the UN General Assembly. So we had issues that we wanted. The president had been a British Christian living in Jamaica and had developed a taste for scotch whiskey. Had returned to Gambia and had renounced Christianity to return to his original Islamic beliefs, but he hadn't lost his appreciation for scotch whiskey. But being a good Moslem he was having a hard time obtaining it. So he would come by the chargi's house. I won't say every Sunday afternoon, but many times.

The chargi would feed him scotch whiskey and had one-on-one time with the president of the country. The guy would basically tell the chargi everything that was happening in the entire country. The chargi would make any demarches that needed to be made.

There could be no servants or other Gambians, on the property while the President was drinking whiskey. Mrs. McFarland didn't want to be there because she just didn't feel welcome. So I would be brought over, and I was the bartender. I made the drinks. The chargi would sit out on the verandah overlooking the Atlantic Ocean - in the intermediate distance, the Swedes gambling on the beach in front of him and ply the president with whiskey and basically go over the entire foreign affairs of the country. I just made sure that the fellow's drink was always fresh.

Q: Well you probably made a greater contribution to American diplomacy than many have.

HELM: We've seldom, in countries that I've been in, had that type of access to the head of state.

Q: Were there other embassies there?

HELM: Yes, there were. The Brits, the French had an embassy, a couple of the African countries had embassies. The Brits represented the entire British Empire.

Q: The High Commissioner?

HELM: Yes. I worked seven days a week, 10 hours a day, one way or another - a young single guy. There were very few diversions, and then once the rain season comes, of course the Swedes go away. About April the Swedish/European tourism season ends until November.

Q: How sad.

HELM: They shut the hotels down, the bars close, and then it becomes Africa again. I had a lot of interesting duties. Visa work: I mentioned before that I had absolutely no visa training. None. And the charge felt that was a deficiency, that I really should know something about visas. At the time there was a correspondence course on visas from FSI (Foreign Service Institute). He insisted that I sign up for this correspondence course on visas, and I wrote off and signed up for it. Mail was always a problem there. Eventually some paperwork showed up and I started taking the course. In the meantime, every day, there were visa applicants. What was I going to do with all these visa applicants every single day? There was a line out in front of my office of visa applicants, and I just didn't know what to do. I lacked the self-confidence just to start issuing visas. I'd been told that you get bad, bad marks on your record book if you issue bad visas to intending immigrants. We didn't do immigrant visas. It was just tourist visas.

Then I started having to issue visas because now the charge $\frac{1}{2}$ was standing over my shoulder saying, "You can't refuse them all, you have to issue some visas, there must be someone here you can issue a visa to." So I started issuing visas, and shortly thereafter started getting blue sheets of paper from the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) telling me I was a bad boy. I didn't know what to do. But, I figured that the Charge' was a lot closer than the INS, to hell with the INS. And so I issued visas.

I did all the admin work at the Embassy. One day I got a call from the Captain of the Port telling me that the Embassy had two crates sitting on the docks. "They've been here for a very long time and if you'll get them out of the port today, I won't charge you thousands of dollars in port charges." The port was two blocks away from the Chancery so I walked down to the port to see the Port Captain. He showed me two enormous lift vans. I said, "I don't have any paperwork, I have no idea what's in it, it's not even addressed to the American Embassy." He said, "I don't care, it's yours, you have to take it. Today." I said, "Well I have no means to take these things. These are gigantic." These were crates that were larger than standard lift vans, six feet by eight feet, six feet tall, two of them. So he called some men over and they had little iron carts. 10 or 12 men picked one crate up and put it on an iron cart and pushed it all the way to the embassy and unloaded it in the carport. Two crates absolutely filled the carports. We had no place to put the chargi's car.

The chargi came and his car had no parking place. He said for me to "Get those crates out of my parking place, right now." "Yes sir, be happy to." So I started opening the crates, and it was family planning material for the Gambia Family Planning Association. Well it turned out that the Gambia Family Planning Association had been disbanded by Government edict some time before and no longer existed. And in fact, the very existence of some of this stuff was enough to get you put in jail in that country.

Q: All condoms?

HELM: Well, now let me get into this. Yes, I had a couple of cubic yards of condoms and I had no place to put them. I got in there, and there was a product of the time called Delfin Foam. It was a little glass bottle of some sort of compressed contraceptive foam. But you had to have a special syringe-like device to get the foam out of the bottle, and there were no devices in the whole shipment. So I had these little bottles, little glass pressure bottles, thousands of them, and I kept digging into these containers. There was a medical device in a case, sort of a big syringe that was an abortion machine of some sort. And I had a few other medical instruments of that type, ob/gyn type devices, the sort of stuff my father had in his doctor's office and other things. I kept digging into the crates. There was an electric typewriter. At that time Embassy Banjul did not have an electric typewriter. That was our first electric typewriter. And glory upon glory, there was a Kalart-Victor 16 millimeter movie projector. And my post didn't have a Kalart-Victor 16 millimeter movie projector. And this was just wonderful! And they had all these movies, hundreds of movies in metal cans. And they were awful. They were movies on how to perform abortions, there were movies on the birth of babies.

I met with the chargé d'affaires and I asked "what was I going to do with this stuff, this is absolutely verboten, it is illegal to have this in this country. He says, "Well, here's what I want you to do. I want you to take the abortion machine and a few of the other medical devices, and I want you to take the ferry across to the other side of the Gambia River. When you're half way across the river, I want you to throw them off the side of the ferry." So I did. The other medical instruments we gave to the local hospital. I put them in a box, took the box over to the hospital, walked in, set it on the front desk and ran out the door. I took the movies and put them in a barrel and burned them. The condoms? Every visa applicant, whether they got a visa or not, got a gift from the United States Government in the form of a strip of multi-colored condoms. They would ask, "What is this?" We'd say, "We don't know, but it's yours." "Well in that case, give me a handful." We'd say, "Certainly, here, take a handful." So we distributed condoms all over the city, but nobody had a clue what they were for. But you'd see children playing with them as balloons.

That was pretty much what was happening in Banjul.

Q: Is there anything else you should mention about Banjul?

HELM: Well, it's where I met my wife.

Q: Don't tell me she was Swedish, gambling on the beach.

HELM: No, she was a Peace Corps volunteer. We did have a 50-volunteer Peace Corps detachment.

Q: In this small area?

HELM: Yes.

Q: What was the Peace Corps doing there?

HELM: They had all sorts of different tasks, primarily education. They had a team of men who were well drillers. They had one lady that was a city planner. They had one electronics graduate that was working with the local telephone company. Basically he was the technical director of the local telephone department, because the British guy that had run the place had quit. One of the things I accomplished was to get the Embassy its very first telex machine by giving that Peace Corps volunteer a case of whiskey, and he re-allocated a telex machine from some other company and gave it to me. We no longer had to go and sit at the public telegraph office to type our outgoing messages.

Q: What was your wife doing - or, your wife-to-be at that time?

HELM: She was a teacher. She lived in the village of Farafenni, which was some ways upriver. Farafenni is at the ferry crossing over the Gambia River on the main highway that connects the Casamance to the main part of Senegal. She taught English and science in that village.

Q: Did you get married there?

HELM: No, we didn't get married there, but when my tour ended I left Banjul and moved to Panama. When her tour ended she went back to her home town of Hudsonville, Michigan. We stayed in contact and got married some time later.

Q: You left there in '74?

HELM: Yes, December 1974.

Q: Where'd you go?

HELM: I went to Panama, via FSI.

Q: First you took Spanish, or did you do something else before you went to Panama?

HELM: Well, let me go back and pick up two more little quick items from Banjul. I mentioned that I got a movie projector with the family planning stuff. There was a Department of Defense supported movie circuit and they would send movies around West Africa. Every month you got two movies. When the movies would come in, I would set the projector up at the chargi's house and he would show movies to his fellow ambassadors and his contacts from the ministries. Then the following weekend I would show the movies at my house for the Peace Corps volunteers, and pretty much anybody that walked in. I would go to the Japanese shrimp factory and get ice, buy a case or two of Amstel beer to put in the ice, and people would bring their own sodas or beer. We would have a nice party. Pretty soon I started picking up the younger guys from the ministries, and the second tier diplomats that were not invited to the Charge's house. I was drawing a crowd of 50, 60 people on my movie nights. That was fine, I didn't mind that - I had a big house. I had servants to clean it, so I didn't have to do much. I usually put out about five gallons of roasted peanuts. That was the sum total of hors d'oeuvres.

Q: You were in a ground nut economy, weren't you?

HELM: Sure. That's what everybody did. So anyway, some Chinese guys started coming. These were nationalist Chinese and our relations with that group were a little dicey in 1973 & 74. We were supposed to be friends with them, but we weren't supposed to be too friendly. So the Chinese ambassador would not get invited to the chargi's house. All the young guys that worked on his agricultural mission would come to my house and see the movies, but he couldn't. After a few weeks, he too started coming. The chargi was a little upset about that, but neither of us really knew how to tell him not to come because it was such an open situation. The chargi finally decided that no harm would come of it. Furthermore, nobody knew about it or gave a darn about Banjul anyway. And then, a couple of times, I was invited to the ambassador's house for dinner. The Chinese ambassador taught me how to use chopsticks. Good food, unbelievably good. And then one day they came and said, "Well, we're not coming again, we're all leaving." It was very sad. They all went out and got on a plane and left, and the next day the Red Chinese came and moved into their same compound and took over the same agricultural projects. But Red Chinese didn't come to my movies. The changing of the Chinas was kind of a poignant moment.

On a lighter note, one of my duties as communications officer was to go out to the airport every second week and meet the courier. The courier would fly in, get off the plane, walk around under the plane. I'd be standing there, we'd open the bottom of the plane, the courier would take out a Large mailbag sized diplomatic pouch, open it and give me our little incoming pouch and I'd give the courier our outgoing pouch which was usually, if we had anything, the smallest bag they make. It would hold a few letter-size envelopes. He'd stick it back in the mailbag, load the mailbag back into the airplane, and then we'd stand around and talk until the plane was ready to go. He would be the last one back on the plane and I would watch the plane leave.

One day I was out there and the courier came and we opened the bottom of the plane. You'll notice I said "we opened it." We'd been doing this so often, the airport guys told me I could open the plane and close it. You wouldn't expect that of a commercial airliner, but anyway. Opened the cargo door, and there was a crated sheep. But the sheep had gotten his head through the rail of this crate and turned his head one way and chewed up somebody's beautiful leather suitcase and was dragging their clothes out of it. The sheep had also turned his head the other way and had chewed up our pouch and was dragging our classified documents out of the pouch and all over the inside of the airplane, not to mention probably eating some. The courier turned pale and said, "What am I going to do?" I said, "There's nothing you can do. I don't have any place to lock up all your stuff. I can't just take you off the plane and deal with you here." "Oh my God what am I going to do?" I said "Here's what we're going to do. You're going to get back on that plane and act surprised when you get off in Accra, Ghana." He said, "Can I do that?" I said, "Yeah. Just shut the door and the sheep will just keep eating." He said, "At least let's move the pouch" so we put somebody else's suitcase between the sheep and the pouch. Anyway, that's enough on Banjul.

I went back to FSI to resumed my interrupted basic training, and when I got there they interviewed me. "Where have you been...what have you been doing, what sort of things have you learned." When we finished the interview, the interviewer said, "Well, you've done all the stuff we were going to teach you in the course, so we're just going to mark it as if you took it." "Okay." So then I was immediately assigned to Spanish language. That was a period of twenty weeks that was pretty close to a living hell. I'm not an adept learner of languages. I studied, and I memorized the dialogues, and I listened to the tapes. I really did work at it. And the best I could get was a two/two, and that wasn't good enough. But they needed me in Panama so I went on to post without clearing language probation. I got there and worked for one of the oldest and crustiest and best, in some ways, and most obscene GSOs (General Services Officer) that existed at the time or since. His name was Ellis Glen. He died not long ago.

Ellis liked to get up at four in the morning, every morning, and go up to Lake Gatun and fish. He fished until about 7:30, put his boat away, and was sitting in his office by 8:15. Since I had nothing better to do at four in the morning, I went fishing with Ellis. I think he enjoyed the company and I certainly did. He was a really good guy and an excellent boss and teacher. Ellis knew more about general services, and about how things worked, than anybody I think I had met up until that time. He had the most amazing vocabulary. I learned a lot of my vocabulary from him. But he could certainly motivate you. He retired about four months after I arrived. We had an Admin Counselor named Harry George French. Mr. French drank at least a quart of scotch a day, and wouldn't wear his hearing aids. Later the Department assigned him to Tokyo to be GSO and he dropped dead a week after his arrival in Japan.

Q: You were there eleven months. A miserable place.

HELM: Actually, I liked the Panamanians, I liked country and the city of Panama. But within the embassy there was a poisonous atmosphere. It seemed that everyone was out to knife everyone else. As a very junior officer I was below the radarscope for most of the competitiveness that was going on, but it was kind of nasty.

Q: How did it manifest itself?

HELM: In people's attitudes. Everybody was mad all the time. It seemed like everyone had a burr under their saddle. A couple of things happened that were interesting. This was during one of the rounds of the Bunker negotiations -

Q: For the Panama Canal -

HELM: And I was the assistant GSO, and the lowest ranked officer in the mission. And so I was assigned to the negotiations. Ambassador Bunker and Ambassador Jordan did not get along with each other. Bunker would fly in to the airport and the U.S. military would meet him and fly him directly to Contadora Island on a helicopter. Then I would fly out the next day from the embassy with all of the classified and unclassified communications, I would spend the day on the island because there was only one flight in the morning and on in the afternoon I would spend the day on the island then fly back with the afternoon flight. Upon arrival in the city, I would visit the Chancery to turn in the outgoing communications from the island. Each evening I would go shopping for the groceries and liquor required on the island. In the morning I would swing by the Chancery, pick up the communications for the island, and catch the early flight. I repeated this every day that Ambassador Bunker was in country. He would be in country for two or three weeks at a time. He would leave and return two months later and repeat the process.

I was present for the preparations for the negotiations. The actual meetings were conducted at night. During the day Mr. Bunker's team would be preparing for that day's meeting. Most of the time I had absolutely nothing to do until the afternoon flight. Almost every day Ambassador Bunker would go swimming in the ocean. He was quite old, I have no idea how old he was but I'd have guessed late seventies, early eighties, and I was his lifeguard. I stood on the beach and watched Bunker swim. Then we would return to the house and he would practice his speeches on me. So whatever issue he was going to speak on that evening, he would practice the speech, get my feedback - I had really no feedback to give him; -he just needed somebody in front of him to talk to - and then he would do it again and again until he felt he got it right. He got his timing right, his words right, just what he wanted to say.

I particularly remember one that concerned the railroad across Panama. Bunker must have given that same speech to me six times, maybe more. Hours of sitting there as he went through the whole speech again and again and again. He got it all right. He was such a gentleman. He would say, "Thank you very much." And then he would say, "Forget everything you heard." And then I would fly back, carrying the mail. The two main staples of life on the island were Thomas' English muffins and Courvoisier.

There was a period of time where the negotiations went sour, and the dictator -

Q: This is Torrijos.

HELM: Torrijos, would line up the students 1st grade through University. They would start out in the morning, little kids carrying placards walking in front of the embassy saying what bad people the gringos were. Then there would be the middle school students; then it would be the junior high and the high school students and the University students. And finally there would be a group of "students" that all had very short haircuts. These were supposedly high school or university students as well. It was this crowd that would break all the windows at the embassy. They would throw rocks at the embassy. I went to Ambassador Jordan pleaded "Please let me put expanded metal grills on the windows. Somebody's going to get hurt." "Oh no, we can't do that, that's the wrong message for us to be sending, for us to fortify the embassy. We can't do this." I had the funding for it, had the metal already identified. They would not let me install the metal. The "students" would and break every window in the embassy. There were three glass companies that would give me quotes within an hour after the demonstrations ended, and within a couple of days we would have replaced ten thousand, fifteen thousand dollars worth of glass. Then a week later, they'd come and break it all again. It was a cycle. As a maintenance officer, this was getting to be a bit of a drag. They just kept coming.

My office was on the ground floor and we had a brand new IBM Mag Card II typewriter. This was the first automated typewriter to arrive at that post, and it was sitting in GSO until someone from the Ambassador's office could take the time to learn how to use it. Since it was sitting in my office, I played with it. It had an instruction book and the magnetic cards. I learned how to operate it and I was the only person at post that could use it. During one of the riots, a great big rock came through the window and landed right in the middle of the keyboard. And that was the end of the Mag Card II. That was my first experience with office automation equipment.

Q: The ambassador was William Jordan, a non-career man from Texas.

HELM: Right, a friend of Lyndon Johnson's.

Q: How did he operate? You say he didn't get along with Bunker.

HELM: Well, he operated the embassy, but he was a bit imperial.

Q: Was he a contributor to the nasty atmosphere there?

HELM: Yes, and I think his wife was contributing. I'm going to tell you one of the worst memories I have of the Foreign Service.

Madame ambassador, the year before I arrived, had gone to the American Women's Club and announced that the American Women's Club was going to help out on the official Fourth of July party. She assigned tasks as if the wives were servants. "You're going to make a turkey, you're going to make a ham, you're going to make egg salad, you're going to do this, you're going to do that." And the ladies of the club all went and did as they were instructed to do. When the party was over, Madame ambassador released the house staff because they were tired, and then had all the wives of the mid-level officers in the kitchen washing the dishes. A few days later the ladies started submitting receipts for the food purchases. "Here's the receipt for the two turkeys that I bought at the PX (Post Exchange)." They were told this was their "contribution", that they weren't going to be reimbursed for the turkey, the ham or whatever it is that they cooked. They were really angry.

I arrived there the middle of June. I'd been at post maybe a week when I was called to the ambassador's office. I thought, "this is my introductory visit to go and meet the Ambassador and be told how happy they are that I've arrived at post." I went up to the Ambassador's office, thinking I'm to be welcomed aboard, and it wasn't that at all. I was sat in a chair and told that I was to put on the Fourth of July party. "Here's your budget, here's the menu. You go and obtain all this food and put on the party." I was just shocked. I had no idea what had happened the year before. The previous week, Madame Ambassador had again gone to the American Women's Club and had announced that they were all going to prepare the food - "You're going to make a turkey, you're going to make a salad" - and the women of the club disbanded it and burned the charter of their little association. Then they all went to the airport and spent the weeks leading up to the Fourth of July shopping in Miami.

There was nobody left to put on the party. The decision had been made that the party would be outdoors, and nobody would be permitted come into the residence. She didn't want all those people, the dirt and the bother of having 500 guests inside her house. The food was going to be served by the pool and we were instructed to set up bars out in the yard. The party was to start at one o'clock and end at four o'clock. That was wonderful except that in Panama, steady as clockwork, on the fourth of July it rains like crazy at about two thirty or three. I wanted to rent a tent. "No, there's no money in the budget. We're not going to spend all the representational money on this." And if you remember, in those days, the fiscal year started on July first. So the fourth of July could suck up the whole year's representational funds. They were trying to keep the budget as low as they could. I got the GSO FSNs and said, "Where am I going to get all this stuff?" And the older FSNs (Foreign Service National Employees) explained to me how this could be done. I went over to the Officers Club at Albrook Air Force Base and the Chief Petty Officers Club at Rodman Naval Station, and to the clubs at Howard Air Force Base. Each of the bases had a club. I had one club make turkeys, another prepare hams, and spread the food orders out between a number of sources. On the morning of the party Embassy drivers picked up the food and brought it to the residence. We had a system where the drivers (and their relatives) would be valet parkers. There was very little parking inside the fence at the residence so they would fill up the streets around the residence with the cars of the dignitaries. They set up a microphone in the circular drive in front of the front door and the dispatcher was supposed to stand there and call, "Bring up car number 42." As the invited dignitaries arrived without chauffeurs they were given a claim check and the car would be taken off down the road somewhere. At the end, when called, the valets would run and find the car and bring it to the front door. At least, that was the plan.

The party started, and everything was wonderful. Soon a dark cloud rolled in over the top of us, steady as clockwork just as it did almost every day in July in Panama. We could see the deluge coming in the distance. Everybody decided they wanted to leave right then, before the rain. The dispatcher was up, "Bring up car 42, bring up car 58, bring up car 112"...we didn't have enough valets to bring all the cars up at the same time, and the roads were too narrow, so we had a huge traffic jam. And then the rains hit - hard. The distinguished guests ran to the house to get out of the rain but the front door was locked. Mrs. Ambassador wanted to make sure that everyone stayed outside. We had all of the Panamanian high officials, leadership of the Panama Canal Company and the commanders from each of the Military facilities and all their wives huddled on the front porch or standing in a very cold rain. Just about that time, in the middle of this horrible rain, the microphone shorted out. If you walked up to the microphone and grabbed it, it would shock the daylights out of you. One gentleman walked up and said to the dispatcher, "I'm the General Counselor of the Canal Zone. Bring my car immediately!" The microphone still worked to some extent, so the dispatcher leaned over the microphone (to talk without touching it) and called for that car. The General Counselor didn't think the dispatcher was being forceful enough, so he grabbed the microphone, and it jolted him so that he dropped it. The next in line was an American two-star general and he picked up the microphone, and it almost killed him as well.

I was the GSO, I put on this party, and I've got all these high officials standing in the rain, their wives in their best dresses, their hair dos are ruined, and everybody is really angry and two of them are seriously hurt. About that moment somebody had enough sense to open the front door of the Residence, and they all went in....muddy, wet, and angry. I tried to get the cars brought up. The cars just wouldn't come. The valets had parked them in people's yards, they were getting stuck and they were running into each other. It was 9 pm before we got all those people out of there, and all the cars straightened out, and all the accident reports written. It was just the most horrible day in my life. (Laughter) It wouldn't end. I was just absolutely soaked, couldn't get any wetter. My final task was to count each of the empty liquor bottles and measure the levels of each of the partial bottles to determine the quantity and value of alcoholic beverage consumed so that the Ambassador could be reimbursed.

Q: Did the ambassador and his wife have anything to say about this?

HELM: They had a lot to say. It didn't matter; it didn't matter a bit. I had done the best I could. I had done what was done in previous years. That story got out pretty quickly. When everybody's wives returned, they thought it was the funniest story they'd ever heard.

Q: I take it the Jordans weren't very popular.

HELM: No, they weren't. They weren't at all.

After I'd been there about six months when a group of Inspectors came. They assembled all the Americans into a conference room and said, "We're the inspection team for a special personnel inspection". There's been a government-wide reduction in force and we have come here to evaluate every position to see if there are any positions in this mission that could be eliminated to meet our quota. I couldn't wait. They didn't even get out the door before I went to them and said, "Me. Take me. I want out of here today." They said, "Well, we were considering your " I said, "No, you don't have to evaluate it, I'll write it up for you, just terminate my position and ship me out of this hellhole right now." They were supposed to be there for about two weeks, and I gather there was someone else that had the same attitude about the place that I did. They filled their quota of two and left practically the next day.

I picked up the phone and I called my career counselor. I said, "The Inspectors have just come. They're going to break the assignment. My tour is over. You've got to find me a place to go." The Career Counselor said, "Um, well, I don't know." Then he said, "Well, a fellow came in here a few minutes ago and turned down Seville, Spain because it didn't have an American school for his children." I said, "I don't have any children. I'll take it. Right now. Consider it sold." And so I got Seville, Spain.

Q: Oh, shucks.

HELM: I really wanted out, and they fooled around for months getting me orders and officially terminating the assignment. I wanted to go that week. I was ready. But I filled out my time and was sent back to FSI for another 10 weeks. I was supposed to go to the Department to hang around the bureau. When I went back to Washington, I had the language test again because I was still on language probation. Not only did I fail it; the instructor was very upset with my language. I'd been working primarily, as assistant GSO, with the mechanics, the carpenters, the drivers, and people on sort of a lower plane, and had picked up some fairly rough language. I wasn't even aware of how rough I was. She was shocked, absolutely shocked. The ordinary sorts of things, an electrical receptacle, in Panama at that time was called an enchupe, because you put something into it. That's what it means; to stick something into something else. And so I would go around and say, "Okay, we need an enchupe here", and the electrician would come and wire it in. Well it turns out that the verb inchufar has a whole different meaning of something stuck into something else, and this lady was absolutely shocked.

I was summarily reassigned to FSI for 10 more weeks so that they could force me to unlearn this absolutely obscene language and get off language probation. I went, and I studied, I memorized the little dialogues, I took their tests, and I got a two plus. I didn't quite make three. I went on to Seville, Spain. Between Panama, between FSI the second time, and Seville, I went and got married.

Q: To the young lady from the Peace Corps.

HELM: Yes, that's correct. She was in Michigan. I started trying to check out of the Department and was stopped and told that I would be the communicator in Seville, and I had to go to a communications course. Orders were cut for me to attend a one-week course in communications. It was going to run right up until through the Friday before I got married on Saturday. This was terrible. I went down to the communications course, I walked in, and the guy was there that had taught me the same course a year and half or two years, earlier. He looked at me and said, "Haven't you been here before?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, we have to give you this course." I said, "Well, what are you going to teach me?" He said, "We're going to teach you to use this big teletype machine." I said, "Well you already taught me that." He said, "Well yes, but we have to teach you again." I said, "Look it up in your book. Is there one at my next post?" He looked it up and there was another small machine at my next post. He said, "I'll have to teach you to use the small machine." I said, "I already know how to use that machine." "I have to teach you how to do diplomatic pouch and mail." I said, "I already know how to do that." He looked at me and said, "What am I going to do with you?" I said, "You're going to sign this time and attendance card right here on the dotted line, and I'm going to get out of here, and we'll just not do it and pretend we did." He looked at me and said, "Well, I guess that's all I can do." So he signed my card, I had credit for having attended that course twice, I flew to Michigan, and got married. Married on Saturday night, came to Washington on Monday, got Gail a passport, and arrived in Seville, Spain on Wednesday.

Q: You were in Seville from when to when?

HELM: 76, 78. I missed the bicentennial celebration in Seville. The wedding was July 23rd and I got to post on July 27th. It was wonderful. Seville was a two-year honeymoon. I just loved Seville.

Q: Who was consul general when you were there?

HELM: Bob Fouché ½. It was a four-officer consulate with an excellent FSN staff. The FSNs had been around for years and years and knew everything there was to know about their jobs. It took me a couple of weeks to figure out that if I didn't disturb them or interfere with them, everything would work just fine. I made it my duty to not cause trouble and let the FSNs do the work. They would bring papers that I would dutifully sign. I hate to sound lazy, but I didn't have a lot of duties. I was the communications officer, but we had very little classified communications. I did the pouch, which really meant that I drove to the Air Force base at Moron de la Frontera every week. I did Admin. tasks that included bringing the inventories up to date, procurements, facilities maintenance and whatever needed to be done. I was staying on top of things.

The consul general noted that I was perhaps under-employed. So he said, "We're going to give you some more duties. From now on, you're the Deaths Officer." There was a huge American retired community in Malaga, Algeciras, and the Costa del Sol area. On the average, one of them a day dropped dead. So I spent a good part of my time processing death certificates, dealing with relatives, and arranging to ship the remains home. I usually didn't get personally involved with them. It was just a matter of paperwork, sending authorizations, and collecting funds from the relatives. Mainly paper pushing. I would produce a death certificate, sign it, and place the Consular seal on it. People would need 10 or 20 original sealed copies, for the courts, insurance companies, for each state where they owned property, et cetera. There was a lot of just signing a name and putting a seal on it.

There was one fellow had died and the remains were shipped to Greenville, Ohio. We got a call from Greenville, Ohio: "Where's the body?" "It's been shipped. I have the airway bill. It's supposed to be there." "No it's not. We went to the airport, met the airplane, and there was no body." So I started trying to trace the body, and it was absolutely untraceable. We had lost grandpa, and weeks went by, no grandpa. About six weeks later I got a call from Greenville, South Carolina, from the TWA (Trans World Airlines) agent who asked me if I'd lost a crate? We found grandpa on a warehouse shelf in a TWA storage warehouse in Greenville, South Carolina and immediately shipped him to Greenville, Ohio.

Q: Were the Spanish authorities a problem?

HELM: The Spanish authorities were the easiest people in the world to work with. They would do anything for you. I never had a problem. They were always just excellent. I think the fact that I had a very positive attitude about the country and about them helped a lot. There was never an issue.

Q: How about the other officers, as compared to Panama. Was it a pretty positive group of people?

HELM: It was a very positive group of people, and I can't point to another place that I've been where I thought there was such a uniformly good group of people. Norman Alexander was the consul, a wonderful guy. Dan Vernon was vice consul. Dan mainly did visas. I did admin and anything else, any odd jobs, and Fouchi½ was an excellent Consul General. Things just worked very well there.

Q: I have a vague feeling I heard that the ambassador had sort of an apartment there to which he used to repair from time to time. Was that in Seville?

HELM: The consulate had been built as the American exposition to the 1929 Worlds Fair that was in Spain. It was an interesting building. It had an oddly shaped courtyard that had been made to suspend a full-scale model of Lindbergh's airplane, so it was misshapen in order to fit the shape of the airplane. The consulate offices were one side of this roughly triangular building. The consul general's residence was the other two sides. There were guest rooms that the ambassador stayed in when he came down. Later, when the consulate was closed, they retained that building and it became almost a guesthouse for people from Madrid to come and stay there. I think that's what you're referring to.

Q: During this period, Portugal was going through its revolution. Was that spilling over at all?

HELM: No, there was absolutely no sense of any troubles in Portugal anywhere else in Spain. The big thing that we were dealing with was American tourists, and narcotics. One of the extra jobs that I took on was visiting the prisoners. Each month I ran a route to all of the major prisons. This was interesting - you would go to a prison and announce yourself, that you were from the Consulate and you were here to see this list of one or two or three, usually young men. You'd go in and have coffee with the warden, and when you finished, you'd be led down to an interview room. It would be like a fairly spartan living room. The individuals would be brought in singly, or sometimes in groups, and you'd just talk to them. "How's life here? They treating you okay?" We had vitamin pills so each prisoner got a months' supply of pills. The prison authorities would censor their mail. I would bring mail from their parents or whoever in my coat pocket and give them their mail, and they would give me outgoing letters. The parents would send money to the Consulate and I would deliver the money to them. If you were in jail and had money you could buy things like tennis shoes, cigarettes, candy. So I would give the money, always cash, 20, 30 dollars at a time, or pesetas. "See ya next month." These kids would have eight, 10 year sentences, or more, and they weren't going anywhere. They were just surviving, hanging out.

Q: Did the thing work the way it so often did, that you'd get maybe an eight, 10 year sentence and after three or four they'd be essentially paroled and gotten out of the country?

HELM: It was an interesting system in Spain. You would be arrested and taken that moment before a magistrate who would pronounce your innocence or guilt right there. No lawyer, no witnesses, no process. If you were arrested at 10 o'clock at night, by midnight you were declared guilty and in jail. 18 months to two years later you had your official trial. At this trial, there'd be lawyers, witnesses, and a formal process. If at the trial you were found innocent, you'd be turned loose. If you were found guilty, you'd be sentenced and the time served would count toward your sentence. With narcotics, they would take the quantity of narcotics that you had and send it to the laboratory in Madrid. The Lab would return a report of the purity and the weight of the narcotics. The normal sentence was one day in prison per gram of pure narcotic equivalent. If we heard that you were arrested and we could get a lawyer to you before you were pronounced innocent or guilty by the magistrate, a lawyer could get a postponement. If you got a postponement, then you'd be tried in a more formal setting during business hours. At that setting you could have your lawyer and witnesses. Your odds of getting off were much greater. We had to be ready. The duty officer rotation was a very serious thing because the DO would get a call at three o'clock in the morning that someone had just been arrested. If the DO could find a lawyer in that town and get him down there within 20 minutes or half an hour, we could very often save a kid from being in jail for several years.

The ones that were in prison tended to be in for a long time. For instance, one kilo of pure hashish, a thousand grams of pure cocaine equivalent that's three years. And they tended to have many kilos when they would be caught. In some cases the kids were being used as mules, in some cases they were themselves doing it. If you could make it across from Morocco into Spain, you were home free to Amsterdam.

We had one horrible case. A beautiful 19-year old girl, kind of a hippie. She'd gone to Morocco, had been smoking dope and living with a Moroccan guy. The Moroccan guys just saw these girls coming and took every type of advantage. The Moroccan guy and the girl got on the ferry to Algeciras and just as the ferry was pulling up to the Spanish dock, the Moroccan guy grabbed his stomach and said, "Oh, oh, I'm having cramps." So he ran off ostensibly to go the bathroom. When the ferry docked, the crew of the ferry chased all the passengers off of the ship but the Moroccan guy hid on the ship where he could see out. If he saw the girl, carrying his backpack and hers, get through the police station, then he would run off the ship, get through immigration empty handed, catch up with the girl, take his backpack and they would continue on. He would have gotten his narcotics through. Of course if he saw her get caught he would stay on-board for the return trip to Morocco.

Well, she got caught. It was pretty obvious - you have two backpacks, many kilos. Maybe five kilos which is eleven pounds of hashish. She was caught. It was very pure. She was in the women's prison at Puerto Santa Maria, the same building that Christopher Columbus visited to get the prisoners for his ships. The conditions were horrible. Her family came over to visit and her mother cried in the Consulate for two days. "Isn't there something you can do?" And there was nothing we could do. That girl was in for at least ten years, and yes she could get one fourth of her sentence off for good behavior, and she could get time off for working in the prison industry. But no matter how you cut it she was going to be in for five, six years. We visited her every month, and every time we visited she would cry. It was just too sad.

I remember another case involving three nice young men from New Jersey. They had brought a moving van full of furniture from Morocco, and were moving to France. The moving van had an extra fuel tank, and that fuel tank happened to be filled with hashish oil, which is a purified version of hashish. They were arrested in Algeciras. A couple of days later, three men came to the Consulate and demanded to see the Consul General. One was a fairly dapper fellow, probably a man in his late 50s, early 60s, very well dressenice suit. The other two were enormous men in their late 20's or early 30's. They were big enough to be pro-football players.

The fellow with the good suit was a lawyer representing the family of one of the young men. The other two fellows were his "assistants". The Consul General told me to put them in the car and drive them to the prison at Algeciras where to visit their client. It was something straight out of some old movies, just like The Godfather. I put them in the back seat of the consul general's Chevy sedan and the Consul General's chauffeur and I sat in the front seat. All the way down there they were talking to each other about how they were going to get this young man out of jail and get him out of the country quickly.

I'd been to that jail several times. The guards knew my face. At the prison there was a huge wooden gate with an iron knocker. "Klong, klong". A little hatch opened and a face appeared that recognized me. A small Judas gate was opened and you would enter an airlock type arrangement. The guards recognized me and sized up the others and held us in the airlock for a few minutes. We were joined by three Guardia Civil officers with automatic rifles. They put the rifles to the backs of the heads of the three visitors and said, "What would you like to do?" I said, "We'd like to visit this prisoner." They said, "You have to go see the warden." (You always had to go see the warden.) So we went to see the warden. He had two chairs in front of his desk and then there was a sofa facing the desk with a couple of feet between the sofa and the wall. The lawyer and I sat in the chairs, the two "assistants" sat on the sofa, and the three GC officers with the machine guns stood behind the assistants with the guns level with the backs of their heads.

The warden said, "How may I help you?" The lawyer said he wanted to see his client. The warden sent for the young man, who came to the warden's office. The lawyer asked "Are they treating you okay?" and prisoner said "Yeah, they're treating me okay." The warden dismissed the prisoner, then turned to the lawyer and asked "Is there anything else I can do for you?" They said, "No, thank you very much," and we all walked out and got back in the car and drove back to Seville. Not one word was said all the way back to Seville. As we were coming back into town I said, "Is there anything else I can do for you?" The lawyer responded saying "Please take us by our hotel, let us get our suitcases, and then drive us to the airport." "Certainly, sir." We went by and got the suitcases, took them to the airport, made sure those three goons got on the plane, and that was that. It was just so out of - The Sopranos.

Q: The Mafia program. Well I guess they thought they could bully their way.

HELM: Yeah, that they could either bribe or bully and get the kids out. It didn't happen.

Q: Did the hand of the embassy rest heavily on Seville, or did they leave you alone?

HELM: I think that the majority of people at the embassy didn't know we were even there. We were so low-key. We didn't want to bring any attention to ourselves, so we didn't. I tried to avoid going to Madrid, as we all did. Nobody came from Madrid to see us much, so it was wonderful. I sent my reports up to Madrid, money reports, administrative paperwork that had to be done, and that was that. Life was good.

Q: After that, what happened?

HELM: I asked to extend and was refused. I went to Quito, Ecuador. That was a lovely place. Had a nice house way up on a ridge. That was just general GSO work.

Q: You were there from '78 to '80.

HELM: When you're a GSO, you are almost the "mommy figure" for an embassy. The ambassador is the "daddy figure" and is the giver of law. The GSO gives you things. The GSO is about the only person in the embassy that comes to your house to do things at your house. There were some pressures there. You tend to find your friends in the missionary or from other missions or the local resident American communities. We became good friends with a number of people with the missionary radio station HCJB, and I'm still in contact with several of them. It was a good tour.

Q: Who was the ambassador when you were there?

HELM: Raymond Gonzales. He had been DCM in Panama when I was there - a really good guy; I liked him a lot.

Q: How did you find the foreign service nationals?

HELM: They were bright. As GSO you work with more nationals than anyone else in the embassy. Throughout my career I've had very good luck and relations with the nationals.

We had a Department of Commerce trade mission. We went out to the airport to meet them on a flight from Guayaquil, and they weren't on the flight. We called Guayaquil and asked them where was the trade mission? Guayaquil started looking around and discovered that they had decided that morning to rent a mini-bus and drive up from Guayaquil instead of flying. They had left the hotel about eight that morning, they should have been in Quito by about noon or one o'clock. By the middle of the afternoon we were searching the hotels and tourist locations but no luck. At about 5 PM we got word that there had been a wreck at a village about two hours out of Quito. We started trying to find it. The rented mini-van had tried to pass a bus against oncoming and there'd been a huge wreck. Two of the Amcits were killed and several of them were severely injured. They were taken to a restaurant in a little village along the highway. The only medical attention they 'd had was a Peace Corps volunteer who had the Peace Corps first aid kit. We managed to get ambulances down and get them back up to the Missionary Hospital. I visited them several times in the hospital and then helped charter a medevac jet that flew from Miami and took them home to Ohio. That was a bit rough.

Q: How did Guayaquil fit in? Did you get involved with folks there?

HELM: Not too much. We supported them out of our supply room, every week or so somebody would drive down with supplies. They were pretty much a freestanding post.

Mrs. Carter came, Roslyn Carter, the president's wife, and that was a big deal. It was like a full presidential visit. This was my first experience at trying to be the GSO for a big visit. It worked out well. The FSN electrician, Segundo Adriano, was called to the Ambassador's residence - there was some problem with the wiring (the Secret Service has overloaded a circuit). - and he went up to the ambassador's apartment. The ambassador lived in a very nice two-bedroom apartment within the huge residence. While in the apartment tracing wires, Segundo stepped out on the balcony to smoke a cigarette. But who was on the balcony but Mrs. Carter, topless, sunbathing! The poor guy threw his cigarette over the balcony, ran out of the residence and drove all the way back down to the embassy to plead for mercy that I didn't have him beheaded or something. He didn't know what was going to happen to him for this transgression.

The Ecuadorian Military made Mrs. Carter the guest of honor at the big military parade and left her standing in the hot sun with nothing to drink and no shade for almost four hours as every single member of the Ecuadorian military paraded by, some two or three times, I think. Mrs. Carter stood for the whole time but several members of the delegation got sick and had to be helped off of the reviewing stand.

Q: You left there in '80, and then where did you go?

HELM: I came to FBO (Foreign Buildings Office). I was in Washington for five and a half years. I came on a two-year assignment to FBO to be an assistant area officer for NEA (Near Eastern Affairs), Middle East, and South Asia. When I finished that tour, they asked me to stay on and be an Asst. area officer in Europe. So I stayed on. When I finished that tour they asked me to stay on and be executive officer for FBO.

Q: Talk a bit about FBO, because FBO in the Foreign Service has a bad reputation that it doesn't listen to local conditions. Everything has to be done in Washington. Back in the 50's when I was in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, they were putting up some staff housing and we pointed out that the open screen porches were pointed all in the direction of what was called the shamal, or the desert wind which blew sand. The answer came back, "You worry about the wind. This is how we've done it." Of course, all the porches got covered with sand. That's the type of Foreign Service story you hear again and again. What was your impression?

HELM: Well, FBO is a unique organization. It operated off of a 1926 law which allowed it to do almost anything it damn well pleased. The director at the time was a fellow named William Slayton. He was not from the State Department but was a political appointee. He had come from the AIA (the American Institute of Architects) where he had been executive director. Before AIA he had been I.M. Pei's business manager.

Q: He was a famous American architect.

HELM: But, Slayton was a severe alcoholic, and very, very egotistical.

Q: He'd been a friend of John Rooney of Brooklyn, too, earlier on.

HELM: Yes.

Q: Who was also an alcoholic, a congressman who had to be kowtowed to because of his position on the Appropriations Committee.

HELM: When I arrived at FBO, it was not long after Wayne Hayes had been discovered with "a secretary that couldn't type." Elizabeth Ray, or something? Hayes had run FBO like his personal fiefdom. He would travel around the world at FBO's expense, be wined and dined at the embassy, and make sweeping pronouncements: "We'll build a new embassy here, whether you need it or not." The whole place was very political. But we were trying to operate the area offices in a fair reasonable way. My job was to write documents to get money from the budget and then disperse the money out to the posts. Rent money, minor improvements, and routine maintenance money. At the time, FBO spent about one third of the department's entire budget. Since I was the South Asia guy, I had India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka. I also was the executor of a pot of money called special foreign currency, which I'll get to in a minute.

We tried to be sensitive to the posts, but there is no doubt about it. Slayton was an imperial individual and followed in the steps of a long line of imperial directors. They didn't give a damn what the post thought. We commissioned a big name New York architect, Harry Wolf, to design Chanceries and Residences for both Doha and Abu Dhabi. He had always wanted to design a pyramid. So he designed a pyramid for Doha. When the functions could not be fitted into a pyramid, he designed a cube impaled on the top of the pyramid. So you had a really strange looking building, on paper.

Clearly, nobody in his right mind was going to build this building. But I was sent out to Doha, accompanying Mr. Wolf, to present the crazy design to the ambassador. I had to keep a straight face. It was difficult. It didn't go well.

Wolf actually had two design projects, the other one was in Abu Dhabi. For Abu Dhabi he designed a large platform with four cubic structures on the top, and no windows, because he said that the weather conditions were so bad that windows were energy inefficient. There was "nothing to see out there anyway." We presented it to the ambassador and the suggestion was made that there be windows. In fact, that Wolf should arrange them so that one side would be seven and the other side 11, like dice. Wolf became very upset and he felt that at neither post was he given the respect that he should have been given, and it was my fault. It was a horse-laugh. We put the diagrams on display, people at the embassy came and saw these beautiful renderings of absolutely ridiculous buildings, and you could just see that if it had been an attempt at humor, it would have been funny. But they were shocked. And I was there trying to put a good face on it.

Q: Well what did you do, back away as best one could and let Wolf carry the water?

H Oh absolutely. "This is Mr. Wolf, the great American architect, and he'll present this to you and I'll run off and hide in the corner." In one case the ambassador stood up and said, "This is ridiculous. This is completely inefficient, it's not going to work here, and I never expect to see it funded or built in my lifetime." Wolf got into it with him. They had a huge fight. Wolf came back to the states, became an alcoholic or he probably already was, went bankrupt, his company fell apart, and the designs were never completed.

I traveled extensively and tried to do as good as I could for my posts. In India we had a number of active projects. We had a unique appropriation of funds from Congress called Special Foreign Currency. This was the excess currency. They had sold grain to India in the 50's and had been paid in local, non-convertible, currency. We could spend it in India, but we couldn't export it and couldn't exchange it. So I had a virtually unlimited budget. We were going around, building in India, any place that needed anything. If they could spend rupees, they would be given as much as they could possibly use.

Q: I think we had something almost equivalent to the Indian national debt. Probably Moynihan got rid of it.

HELM: Moynihan did too good a job of getting rid of it. We could have used a few more millions, but we had that.

Q: Well in India, I would have thought that the embassy and residence are real showpieces, but they look like hell to maintain. Was that a problem for you, because they were sort of national treasures.

HELM: Well they were hell to maintain. However, as long as we had the special foreign currency it didn't matter. Maintenance could be bought locally. If you remember, we owned three city blocks. The first block was the embassy, the ambassador's residence, and the AID (Agency for International Development) building. The second block was 56 townhouses, commissary, recreation facility (club and pool) warehouses, and a generator plant. The third block was the 1200 student American School. All of that was operated by the embassy. We had a huge buildings program out there.

Q: I would think that Wayne Hayes had been cut off after Jimmy Carter with his non-typist assistant, but was there a power that took his place within Congress?

HELM: There really wasn't, but Slayton had a lot of congressional contacts, and every time somebody got after Slayton he would have another article written in the Journal of the AIA and would gather up support and keep his job. They couldn't get rid of him.

Q: Did you run afoul of Slayton, or have to deal with him at all?

HELM: I had to interact with Mr. Slayton daily. But I learned how to deal with the guy. The man had a nasty temper; he would just tear people apart. But he had a soft spot for me. The reason was that I figured out his daily routine. He would come in the morning, have a horrible headache, be constipated, and go spend a couple of hours in the men's room. By 11 o'clock in the morning he would come out of the men's room and feel awful. Anybody that tried to bother him would be absolutely, mercilessly attacked. Then he would go to lunch, have his three martini's and come back and feel great for about 45 minutes. Then he would start to feel bad again. Anybody seeing him between two and four thirty would be attacked. Then about four thirty he would open the bar in his office and he would again feel great. He worked until about seven every night. So I got in the habit of staying until seven every night, and between about five pm and seven pm all the other people would leave the building, and I could go in and get just about anything I needed approved or funded. Or he would say, "Why don't we do it this way." The man was brilliant. He would tell you to do these things, and if you did them, it would work out well, he would approve it. My posts had plenty of money. Most of the people in FBO hated him.

Q: Did you have good relations with the Near Eastern Bureau?

HELM: I had very good relations with the Near Eastern Bureau. For awhile. After the Pakistan fire -

Q: That was the one in Islamabad in 1979.

HELM: That's correct. I went out to Pakistan after the fire with a team of people. I was the money guy and they were all fire inspectors, or engineers. We would try to come up with cost estimates and the scope of work to repair all the damage. We developed a strategy of what we were going to do. It was an awful mess. It wasn't just the chancery. It was the housing, the community center, everything.

I came back to Washington and we put out a report and budget of what it was going to take to repair it. Slayton flew out to Islamabad. The ambassador knew that Slayton was alcoholic. Slayton was staying at the residence, and the other area officers, some other guys who had gone on that trip - not me, because I'd just come back - were at a hotel. They managed to separate Slayton from his keepers, and the ambassador had Slayton at his house, served him a nice dinner and a lot of alcohol. At the end of the evening, the ambassador and his admin officer presented Slayton with a telegram, already typed, which he signed. They went back to the embassy and transmitted the telegram that night. The guys that were traveling with Slayton did not know of the existence of the telegram. The next day they flew on to New Delhi where I was able to get hold of the guys and said, "What the hell is with this telegram that you sent from Islamabad? You've promised to build the ambassador a swimming pool of his own, a warehouse, to double the size of the club, to build him another complete housing unit" - and there were other things. It was a shopping list of millions of dollars. I said, "This isn't in the budget, there's no program, Slayton has sent a message that says, 'I have approved of all of these things and you are to fund them and build them immediately.'"

They said, "What are you talking about?" So I had the telegram re-transmitted to New Delhi. They got it and called me back. They were shocked, they hadn't seen it. They confronted Slayton and said, "what about this telegram?" And he said, "Oh yeah, there was some telegram, yeah, I saw a telegram before I left post. Yeah, after dinner that night they showed me, but I don't remember what it was about." I said, "What are we going to do?" Well, they got back, and we ignored the telegram. We just pretended that it didn't happen. Slayton called me one day, said, "I have to go to a meeting at Main State. Come with me." I said, "What's it about?" and he said, "It's about Islamabad." On the way, on the shuttle bus, Slayton said, "It's about that telegram, and you are to tell them that under no circumstance can we fund any part of it. It's not part of our capital program, it's not budgeted, and we don't have money for those things."

We got to the meeting, and on one side of the conference table was the ambassador, Ron Spiers. Next to him was the NEA executive director, Sheldon Kris. Next to him was the NEA post management officer, Anita Booth. And on this side of the table was Slayton and me. Slayton said, "Thank you very much for inviting us over to the discussion about all these projects. I'm terribly sorry, but I have to leave. Mr. Helm will take care of this." And he walked out of the room! (Laughter). So there I sat, with the ambassador and Sheldon Kris and Anita Booth. "Where's all the money? You've got to fund this. You promised in this telegram that you were going to." I said, "We have no money, we're not going to do any of this stuff. It's not even being considered and we're not putting it in the budget." And they just blew up. And they said very hard things to me. I had no lee-way. I'd been given instructions to tell them there was no money and these projects weren't going to happen. They went berserk.

After that meeting, a few weeks later, Slayton called me into his office and informed me that at the request at NEA I was no longer the area officer in the NEA bureau. There was a vacancy in Europe, and he said, "We're moving you to this vacant job, and you are out of NEA effective this instant. Don't ever talk to those people again." And I said, "If that's what's going to be, then that's the way it is." So I went back, by this point Islamabad was actually under construction, and they were getting change orders. You always have change orders in construction, unexpected expenses or whatever, and this left a vacancy in the NEA office. The other two guys in NEA didn't want to go near Islamabad because it was such a snakepit, after they saw the way I'd been treated. Incidentally, it was those two guys that were on the trip in New Delhi that I was talking to. So I went over to the EUR office and the NEA Bureau started calling me saying, "You have to go down and prepare a telegram to send money to Islamabad for such and such a change order." "I'm sorry, I can't do that, I'm not even supposed to talk to you. The guys that work there have to handle the Islamabad money now. I can't do it." And they persisted were really becoming abusive to me.

Finally one day, Anita Booth called me and said, "You have to do this, I'm instructing you to do it. Go send the money. Money isn't being sent. The project is getting off schedule because we're not sending the money." "Those guys have to send the money; I can't do it." So finally, I did something I shouldn't have done. I told her to stick it up her ass. Oh, it was a crisis. I was told that it was going to be a sexual harassment case. I wrote back and said, "Both sexes have assholes. It's not sexual harassment, it's simple harassment." That didn't set well with them, so they demanded a public apology and they all came over to hear it. I stood up at a staff meeting and said, "I apologize for the use of indelicate language. Thank you very much. Goodbye." And that didn't set well, either. So my relations were not particularly wonderful.

Shortly thereafter, Richard Dertadian, the Administrative Counselor from Islamabad, became the Deputy Asst. Secretary for Foreign Buildings and the Ambassador from Islamabad, Richard Spiers became Undersecretary for Management and I was shipped off to Mogadishu, Somalia. The worst place they could think to send me. I was just so happy to get out of FBO that Mogadishu looked pretty good.

Q: You're confirming what I'd heard about the political side and the imperial side of...

HELM: Yeah, it was all there. And if you were sufficiently junior and humble, and you stayed low, you could get along. Bill McCollough was the Chief of the Design and Engineering Division. He had risen through the ranks to become head of all the architects, engineers, and building designers. Bill was a really nice guy, very knowledgeable, a very sharp guy. He had one minor failing: he could barely read. The man simply could not pick up a piece of paper and read a whole page of text. Since he didn't read he also didn't write. People were having extremely difficult time dealing with Bill because they kept sending him memos and couldn't figure out why he never answered them. He had stacks of paper on his desk and he never read any of it. He simply was incapable of reading. And it took me awhile to figure this out. So I learned that if I went to his office and said, "I need this telegram and it's got a paragraph that you need to clear," and then read the paragraph to him out loud, he might make changes, or he might just sign it. But once I quit sending him memos, we got along great. I went on a couple of trips with him later. The man was brilliant. He could look at a set of drawings, he could visualize a building, understand how every part of that building was going to work. But he just didn't read text. I was very successful working with that group from then on because I quit sending memos.

Q: You left in '85 and went to Mogadishu. How long were you there?

HELM: Two years. Actually it was '86 to '88.

Q: By this time, did your wife accompany you? Did you have children?

HELM: By this time, I had a nine-month old baby. One of the reasons that I stayed in FBO and took the abuse as long as I did was that we were in the process of trying to adopt a child. I couldn't leave town without forfeiting this whole process. This was more important to us than anything else.

Q: Everybody has priorities, and that certainly would rank number one on anybody's priorities.

HELM: So even after things went sour at FBO, I stayed, took the abuse, and continued to work. Once we had the baby, and once we had the court order I was free to go.

Q: This is tape 3, side 1 with John Helm. What was Mogadishu like when you got there in '86?

HELM: Hot. We were on the airplane about to land in Mogadishu and Gail and I were traveling with an infant. I had a stroller that folded like an umbrella. Lots of luggage, all sorts of baby stuff, and the plane was crowded. We'd been sitting next to an American going to US AID. We got there he asked if there was anything he could do to help, and I said, "Would you please carry the stroller and meet me at the bottom of the ramp." He said he would, and we got a little bit separated. I was standing in the middle of the airplane looking out a window, when I saw an African man running, fast as he could, away from the airplane with my stroller. I never saw it again. So my introduction to the post was having my stroller stolen, the airport was chaos, I also had a dog in a shipping kennel and it was hot and I really didn't know what I'd gotten myself into.

But, you know when you meet your wife and she's living in a tin shack in Farafenni, Gambia, you know that you're with someone that's tougher than the norm. We stuck it out and eventually had a pretty good life there.

Q: Who was the ambassador while you were there?

HELM: Frank Crigler; he was a bit imperial, himself. But the interesting thing there was that we owned this compound, and admin and GSO offices were at the compound. The Chancery was in horrible little building downtown in the middle of the city. The ambassador's residence was on the far side of the city. FBO was just re-starting the construction project when I got there. Part of the reason I went there was my FBO connections for the construction project. I seldom saw Ambassador Crigler, and it was a blessing. I had a very large GSO crew, three assistant GSOs, a semi-locally hired American auto mechanic, twelve Filipinos - third country nationals, four hundred Somali FSNs and another four hundred local guards. It was an empire.

Q: What was living like then?

HELM: Everything was made out of concrete. The houses were nice. We had secured them. You locked yourself with a steel gate into the residential part of the house, and then you locked yourself into your bedroom. You had 24-hour guards. The security situation was not good. But it was petty theft sort of things. It tended not to be violent. The feeling was that if they broke into your house and started stealing things, just let them have it. But you locked yourself in to protect yourself.

When I was in Washington, I had a dog, an American Eskimo Spitz. I lived in DC, and my house had been broken into when the dog was a pup, and the dog was kicked around rather viciously. We surmised that it was black teenagers that had done this. The dog went with us to Africa, and the dog grew up and spent the rest of her life trying to extract revenge on a black teenager. My house was never bothered, one of the very few in the whole mission. They never even attempted to rob my house. I had a guard and he would walk around the inside of the perimeter wall, around the yard, and the dog had a path about three feet inside of his path. They formed concentric circles. The guard would never cross the dog's path, and the dog would compel the guard to stay on his path, and they would walk around together with the dog growling at him. But my house was never robbed.

The social life: you went to other people's houses or you had them at your house, or you went to the Marine house. That was the total social life. There was a little club at the K-7 compound with a swimming pool. People who had small children tended to hang around together, take the children swimming.

Q: Could you get out in the country at all?

HELM: No. The government required us to get a special visa to go more than a set number of kilometers out of the city limits. If you drove out of the city a very short way you came to a guard house, and if you didn't have a visa to go into the countryside, you couldn't go. I never went.

Q: Did you go over to Nairobi for recreation from time to time?

HELM: A couple of times I went to Nairobi. The first Christmas we were there, Jeffrey was about 17 months, we flew to Nairobi before Christmas so that Jeffrey could see a Christmas tree. We went to the New Stanley Hotel and saw a Christmas tree. That was a big deal. Stayed there a few days and then flew back.

Q: Later, the situation had gone septic, the technicals running around with machine guns.

HELM: I'll explain to you what happened from my perspective. Remember, I had a huge national staff. All five tribes were represented on my payroll. These were people who had been working together in a mixed group for a long time. They all knew each other, they got along well, they were all good people. Now I don't know what you've heard about the cause of the problems in Somalia, but this is my understanding of it.

There had been a longstanding war with Ethiopia and a group of men who were against the dictator Siad Barre [Maj. Gen Mohamed Siad "Barre"] had moved over into the Ogaden, the Ethiopian side of it, and had formed an army and were being supported by Libya. Then there was an announcement from Shell Oil Company that up in the northern part of the country, just opposite Yemen, on the southern side of the Red Sea, Shell had discovered an immense basin of oil. The northern tribes who had always had problems with Mogadishu - these were from the old British Somaliland versus Italian Somaliland - decided that the guys from the south were going to steal the oil, and they were going to get nothing. Then the army that was in exile in the Ogaden invaded because all of a sudden it appeared that there was something worth having. Up until this point there just wasn't much worth fighting over in Somalia. The exile army swept as far as the city of Hargeisa and forced the Somali government forces to retreat. General Morgan, the Somali general in the north, used artillery on the town and just blew the daylights out of it. The exiles were pushed back but the city was in ruins. Thousands of people were hiding in the desert with no food or water and many civilians died. The northern tribes resented that bloodshed, that unnecessary violence, and it progressed by several stages into a civil war. Tribalism degenerated into clanism which then progressed to war-lords and street gangs.

All this was happening right at the end of my tour. I decided to send Gail and the baby home early. I got them reservations, and the day Gail and Jeffrey went get on the plane, it arrived but it had been used to haul wounded soldiers from the north down to the Mogadishu and the seats were bloody. It was a mess. Somali soldiers started pulling Somalis off the plane and putting foreigners on the plane. Any non-Somali that might have witnessed atrocities in the north was being arrested shipped out of the country. Anybody that was related to foreign press was being stuck on the airplane. They packed it as full as they could, including standees, but somehow Gail stayed on the plane and flew to Nairobi. At the Nairobi airport everything went to hell. Refugees were arriving in Nairobi and there were showing up with no money, no passport, no reservations and no plans. Unscheduled flights were arriving from Mogadishu and many of the evacuees were injured or unable to cope with the transition in their lives. Somalia was falling apart and the Nairobi airport was overwhelmed.

The inter-tribal differences started rising up within our staff, within the embassy FSN community, to the point that I thought we were going to have a battle inside the GSO compound. I called a group meeting and basically said, "You guys have all lived together and worked together for many years. You've been friends, and this is the American compound, and if you come here you just have to get along with each other. Try to get along with each other as best you can." And I think that helped a little bit. The Somali society was fractured. The Army would run patrols through the villages and neighborhoods of the city, drafting men to go fight (at gunpoint). Soldiers would go up on the main highway and stop the cars at gunpoint, chase the occupants out, and take the car. One or two real soldiers would get in and they would fill in as many "draftees" as they could. If it was a big SUV(sport utility vehicle) they could put 10 or 12 in. They would drive them to the front and tell them to go fight. These recruits had no uniforms, no training, no guns. They'd say, "Go up in there and go find someone that's dead, take the gun and go fight." We were losing FSN staff at the embassy. A couple of times we were able to chase down and find the guys before they were taken to fight.

There was one particular tribe that was the most at odds with the Mogadishu government. Members of that tribe were being arrested. A number of them worked for the embassy and we were able to protect them to some extent. Those men moved onto the Embassy campus and camped out. They just moved in and never went home. About this time, the marketplace fell apart. There was no food in the town; the town was starving. The FSN's leadership committee came and asked if we could figure out a way to import food in lieu of pay. We setup a food program for them. They would get their pay in Somali shillings from the embassy cashier and then they would redeposit it at the official exchange rate, 10 shillings to the dollar. The street rate was 1,000 to the dollar. They would redeposit their shillings into what was called a suspense deposit account. I was using those dollars to import containers of food. So every pay period, for a couple of months, I was importing four or five containers of foodstuffs and they were taking their pay in food. One ration of this food was 100 kilos of flour, 100 kilos of rice, 100 kilos of sugar, 10 kilos of tea, 20 liters of cooking oil, and 20 kilos of pasta. For some reason, they liked spaghetti. Those six things. That's 600, 800 pounds of food. Each FSN was getting 800 pounds of food every two weeks.

Then the question was, "How do we distribute it? How do we get it to our houses?" I was using the embassy motor pool to deliver the food to these FSN's homes because they couldn't carry 800 pounds on their backs. The FSNs were black marketing a lot of it and they were feeding whole villages with this food. This is the only time in my career where my actions saved a lot of lives. We had tribal leaders from all of the tribes represented on the FSN staff. I was able to identify these men and get them into a room and discuss issues rather than fighting over them. For the FSNs the Embassy compound was an island of relative safety and was a source of financial, emotional and dietary support for the employees and their families.

I had a Mitsubishi Montero, a lovely car, and I was getting ready to leave the country. I wanted to sell it. A Somali told me he wanted to buy it. He was a general, and he offered some fantastic sum, so I sold it to him. He came to my house with the money, and it filled three duffel bags with cash. I had so much Somali money that I could not lift it. I hauled the money down to the embassy, dragged the duffel bags to the cashier, and said, "Here's the money for the sale of my car."

They started counting the money. Some small percentage of it was unacceptable because the bills were worn out. When the cashier finished, he said, "You have too much money. You're only allowed to exchange amount that you paid for it. Here's your excess Somali shillings." I had a bushel basket of Somali shillings left. I asked "Can I buy some food, the same as the FSNs?" They thought about it for awhile and they said okay. I redeposited all those shillings and I bought food. I owned personally ten of those 800 pound rations. A week or two later, the food came in. By this point my wife and child were gone and I was living in a temporary one-bedroom apartment on the K-7 compound, and suddenly I became the owner of 8,000 pounds of food. I took one of the rations to the house that I had lived in and divided it between the lady that cleaned the house, the guards, and the relief guards. I delivered the food to all their compounds. This was just the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to them. However I still had more than 3 tons of food.

There was almost no food in the American commissary. I took it over to the commissary. "Here's all this sugar, rice, oil, flour, pasta and tea. Take it." The commissary lady said, "Well, don't you want something for it?" I said, "No, I can't make a profit, it came from the car effectively." She said, "Well we can pay you." I said, "What will you give me for it?" So they wrote me a check for some amount, I don't remember. I donated the money. Because I did that, the American community had sugar and rice and pasta available to them, because shortly after that the port closed and they couldn't import food either. That 7200 pounds of food that I turned in kept the embassy running for weeks.

Q: You left there when? In 88?

HELM: Crigler insisted that I stay at post to put on the fourth of July party for him.

Q: You're a great fourth of July "putter onner", aren't you?

HELM: Well I'm not sure that I'm great, but it is something I'm capable of doing. The problem was that there was a war on. The American ambassador's fourth of July party took hundreds, maybe even a thousand or more soldiers, and we had to close the neighborhood for three hundred yards in every direction around the house. It was a huge undertaking to put on this party. I got that done, and I got out of there. All of my household goods got out. Everybody that was moving that I was responsible for getting their stuff out, everything that was supposed to get out, got out. People that followed me weren't so lucky.

Q: So in '88, where did you go?

HELM: This is another pretty good story.

Q: 3rd of November, 2004. John, 1988 you had left Mogadishu Somalia, packed up and got everybody out of there, and then what happened?

HELM: I had a problem getting out of there myself. When I had been at FBO, I shared an office with a guy named Don Bryfogle. He got a good assignment; he went to Stuttgart. On his way out, "I've got Stuttgart, ha, ha, ha, what a wonderful place." Well I ended up in Somalia. I saw him later and he sort of ribbed me about that. While I was in Somalia the ambassador called me up, said, "I have a list of people who are fair share candidates, who haven't served at a hardship post in a long time. This is for your replacement." He read off the list and the first name alphabetically was this guy Bryfogle. I said, "There's your man." (Laughter) So Don was assigned to replace me. But I didn't get an assignment.

I had filed my bid list on time, in the proper format and order, and I had filed updates several times as the jobs that I had bid on were taken off the list. You filed your bid list in November and the positions would start getting assigned in January and February. I didn't get assigned. The list kept getting shorter. Everything I'd bid on was given to somebody else. I still didn't have an assignment and I was sending telegrams back to the department and they were just going in a black hole. We had a tremendous time offset from Washington. I stayed late one night and attempted to get a call through. I actually did get a phone call through the Somali phone system back to my CDO (career development officer) who answered the phone and expressed the sentiment that we don't like to talk to candidates on the phone, give me a telegram. Click.

It's late May, Bryfogle coming in a couple of weeks in June, and I have no assignment, no orders out of there. In the meantime the country was hell and I'd just packed my family up and shipped them out. You can sign a repayment agreement that says you will pay for the shipping if you don't ever get orders. I filled out one of those forms. But I had no assignment, and I was a nervous wreck.

As luck would have it, the Director General, George Vest, was traveling in the region. His travel arrangements came undone. He noted that he could get a flight into Mogadishu from Egypt and catch a Saudia flight to Riyadh the next day, and overnight in Mogadishu. While he was at the airport rearranging his flights they sent a message down to the embassy from Cairo that said, "George Vest is getting on a plane right now, coming to Mogadishu. Put him up for the night." The ambassador was greatly surprised to have the director general drop in on him with about three hours' notice. He very quickly put together a reception for that evening and arranged to meet Mr. Vest who was arriving at about 11 in the morning. Vest came in, went to the residence. By late afternoon he called an "all hands gathering" at the American compound across the street from the embassy compound. There was a club, a pool, and a little pavilion. He stood up and announced who he was and gave a speech about what the director general was supposed to do. Then he said, "Does anyone here have a problem or an issue with personnel that you'd like to bring to my attention?" I was intending to talk to him privately, but the more I thought about it, the angrier I got. Mr. Vest repeated "Surely there is someone here who has some issue with personnel." I stood up and said, "Yes, I have an issue. My career counselor is a turkey." "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, I've submitted seven bid telegrams, I have over 35 bids submitted, it's late May, my tour officially ends next month, my replacement is coming in two weeks, and I don't have an assignment. And when I tried to call the CDO, he wouldn't even talk to me on the telephone."

That took the wind out of Mr. Vest's sails. He said to me, "Are you coming to the reception this evening?" I said, "Yes, I am." He said, "Bring all of your documents to me tonight and I'll look into it." I said "Alright, there's really only two jobs in the world left for me and they're both in the department." He said, "Do you want to go back to the department?" I said, "Yes." One was in FBO and one was in OPR (Office of Operations), and since I'd just been expelled from FBO I chose OPR. I met with Ambassador Vest at the reception and gave him copies of all the telegrams. The next morning we put him on the plane to Riyadh. Saturday morning, three days later, I got a call from the communications office - they opened for a few hours on Saturday morning - "Come down, you have telegrams." I went down and it was my assignment cable, my orders, and my friendly message from my CDO, almost consecutive telegram reference numbers. I don't know what he did, but he certainly made the wheels turn, and I deeply appreciated it.

Q: So you went to what job in Washington?

HELM: I went to the Office of Operations, under the A (Administrative) Bureau. It was a special projects staff. I was told that I was going to be in charge. I went in, sat down, and was quickly informed by another lady that she was in charge. So there was already some friction. I'd barely arrived. I said, "Well, what sort of things do we do?" And I was informed that one lady was sort of a shadow budget office because A/EX (A Bureau executive office) really didn't provide very good services. This lady did for us what we couldn't get done. This other lady was a shadow personnel office. Then there was a fellow there who was a personnel officer, but he didn't like being one. I said, "Well, what about me? What did my predecessor do?" They told me that he didn't do anything. He sat and stared at the walls for two years, and when his tour ended he'd gone off to another foreign service post. "What?" "Yeah, he didn't do anything." Occasionally they would have him write a memo, or attend a meeting, but for the most part he just came to work, sat in the office, wandered around, and talked to people. I said, "Gee, that doesn't sound like much of a job."

So I sat in the office. We had a couple of things we were doing, one of which was attempting to fire people. We would go around and supervisors would identify civil service employees who were non-performing, and we would develop, over a period of months, memos and counseling statements which would result in firing people. Well, that's no fun. You don't want to do that. But I did it for awhile. There are certain offices in State where I'm still given a great deal of respect because of our successes in getting rid of deadbeats.

Q: How did you do this? This is a theme that comes up from time to time about the almost impossibility, particularly with civil servants. With foreign service it's the promotion up, it's hard enough there, but with civil servants you don't have that.

HELM: You go in and meet with the supervisor, who tells you that x individual is non-performing and gives you a long dissertation of all the shortcomings of this individual. Then you go to the individual and you usually get the long dissertation of the wrongs committed by the supervisor. You write up papers on both of these, and then give each the other side of the story. You meet with both of them again. Very often it's just simply personality incompatibility. "Okay, we'll get you a new job, we'll move you over to somewhere else. We'll try to break this deadlock." But occasionally, and more frequently than you could imagine, the supervisor was right. The people simply were not performing, and you'd go to them and say this. "You have to do this, this, and this." You give them a period of time, couple of weeks, come back, and say, "Well, are they performing, meeting your expectations." "No they're not." You meet with them again. You give them another memo. You exchange memos again - a lot of paperwork - you go away, and in a few weeks come back and check it out again.

A lot of it had to do with alcohol. There were some cases of suspected drug abuse. You get a call that says, "Mr. So and so is drunk again today." You go down to the office and he looks drunk, smells drunk, but you can't say he's drunk. You have to go get a doctor or a nurse to come talk to him. They decide he's been drinking - they can't say he's drunk unless he consents to a blood test, which of course he never does. But you document this, and eventually you build a case, write a memo to the performance evaluation office within personnel, and they have a process they go through of hearings. You appear. "On this day I went and I saw and I did. This person was, was not." And after you've gone through all this, they can fire them. They can make it happen. But you can't make it happen unless you have a tremendous amount of backup. That's really unpleasant work.

I sat there and stared at the walls. The Deputy Assistant Secretary for Operations at the time was Richard Faulk. You know that he is famous for having a temper, and famous for having cut a corner a time or two in his career. One of his favorite stories is the time he was in Abu Dhabi and put a mortgage on the ambassador's residence to build a new embassy, effectively, all without FBO's knowledge. There was a great deal of stink about it, but since it worked out he was able to finesse and get away with it. Another of his favorite stories was that he had an FSN who was a problem. If you know Dick, he's a big guy, a football player bear of a guy. The story goes that he grabbed this FSN who was a scrawny little fellow, took him over to the balcony from the sixth floor, and held him out at arms' length in the free air by the neck. The guy was out kicking in the wind, and Dick said "If you don't get with the program I'll simply turn you loose and drop you." But he got the FSN's attention.

I sat and stared at the wall for a couple of weeks and sent him a memo that said, "If you don't find me meaningful work, I'm going to start looking for another job as soon as possible." I sent it over across the hall to Faulk's office and didn't hear anything from him. A week passed, nothing happened. So I started going around to all of the bureaus, talking to the executive directors, saying, "Do you have a job for me? I'm doing absolutely nothing. Do you need a TDY (temporary duty assignment), do you need someone on night duty in the OpsCenter, any meaningful task that I could be put to?" Mr. Faulk said, "What's this I hear that you are going around looking for work, saying you don't have a job?" I said, "Well it's true, and I sent you a memo telling you I was going to do it, and here's a copy." He looked at this and said, "Yes, I saw that, but I didn't think you really meant it." I said, "Well, I meant it. Either find meaningful work or I'm out of here. I'm just not going to stare at the wall for two years." He said, "Okay, I've got a job for you." At that time the Department of State had recently taken over delegation for operation of the Main State building. He said what he wanted me to do was take a report that had been prepared by GSA(General Services Administration) listing the shortcomings of the building, and start evaluating, validating the report.

So one of the ladies in the office and I visited every restroom in the building, turned on every faucet and flushed every toilet in the entirety of Main State and validated the report. A lot of stuff didn't work. We went around to the mechanical areas, crawled into various cavities in the building and discovered tremendous amounts of mismanagement, filth, junk. The building was dirty, poorly run, nothing seemed to work well. If you were in the building in the late '80s, you'll remember what I'm talking about.

Q: I was out of the Foreign Service then. I always felt I didn't want to touch the walls when I went back in.

HELM: Which were sticky. Really, it was not a nice place to work. The whole building smelled funny. We started developing a plan of action to upgrade the building. When State had taken the delegation from GSA, a lot of the building operations people had been force moved from GSA to State. Many of the people I'd been working to try to get fired were GSA people who had been seconded to State against their will.

Q: This is how they cleaned out their problems.

HELM: Exactly. We didn't have a buildings office, a maintenance office, anything except what we had inherited from GSA. So we started trying to build our own infrastructure for maintenance and building renovations as well as office renovations and bureau reorganization type changes. Shortly thereafter, Faulk got a new deputy named Vincent Chaverini who today is the DAS (Deputy Assistant Secretary) for OPR. He was a property expert, and came to us from Agriculture. He brought a couple of people with him from Agriculture. I was tasked with developing the paperwork rationale to renovate the State Department. At the time, every square inch of Main State was filled with somebody. There was no swing space. We couldn't make room to do anything, because as soon as we cleared off a little piece of space some other person or office was moved into it. But there was a building across the street called Columbia Plaza, occupied by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the Bureau of Mines, some Federal Reserve Offices, and the Resolution Trust Company. It was written up as the sickest building in Washington. So using Mr. Chaverini's connections we went to GSA and got Columbia Plaza (SA-1) assigned to the Department of State. Then State and GSA made an arrangement where we would share the cost of renovating Columbia Plaza.

I wrote the scope of work for the renovation of Columbia Plaza. GSA hired the architect, but I was the Project Officer, the team leader. Through the whole design effort, I made the design come together. There was a retired FSO, Richard Martin, joined the group to help us with the high level dealings in the Department of getting this project off the ground. Dick had been a special assistant in the A (Administrative) Bureau before he retired. He came back as a contractor working with us. We put the Columbia Plaza project together, and then were working on getting it funded through, first, the Department, then OMB (Office of Management and Budget), then Congress. Chaverini, with me helping him, produced big display boards, 30 inch by 40 inch posters, around 20 or 30 of the things. We developed a "show and tell" briefing on the project. Ultimately, we gave that briefing 175 times. Anybody that would allow us through the door got the briefing. In FY '90, we were ready for our money. And we didn't get a cent. In FY '91 we were ready for our money, and we didn't get a cent. And in FY '92, we were all ready to go; we really thought we had it then, and we didn't get a cent. And then, I guess it was in October of that year, one night, Dick Martin had a sudden cerebral hemorrhage, and died. I was terribly depressed. I thought the project was never going to happen. We'd been to hearings on the hill. One time we went up to a hearing with Congressman Gus Savage's subcommittee. That morning there was an article in The Washington Post that said that Congressman Savage had been voted the dumbest congressman in the Congress.

Q: Which was quite a feat.

HELM: Well, to be the first guys to stand up in front of Gus Savage's committee at nine o'clock that morning was not pleasant. Congressman Savage, on one of his Africa trips, had reportedly sexually contacted or somehow harassed a Peace Corps Volunteer. That incident had become publicized, and he'd always felt that the State Department had done that to him. Consequently, he had it in for State. I remember going to that particular hearing, and he just ripped into us. We never got a word in edgewise. We sat there and took abuse from this congressman for two solid hours. He banged the gavel and announced the meeting was adjourned, and goodbye. Stood up, and walked out. We just weren't going to win.

So there I was, November or December of '92. They talked me into extending.

Q: You'd been there four years by this time.

HELM: Yes. I'd extended twice to keep this project going. In addition to Columbia Plaza, we were also planning the Main State renovation; all Columbia Plaza was to be was the swing space. Office hotel was what we were calling it at the time. Bureaus would move in to Columbia Plaza for as long as it took, and then they would move back to their space. The constant rejection of the money, the death of Dick Martin, I was absolutely devastated, and I'd been submitting my bids again. I went to see the career counselor and said, "I've put in my bids. What are my prospects?" The guy says, "Oh, we're not paying attention to any of your bids." I said, "Why not?" He said, "Oh, Chaverini said you were going to convert to Civil Service and that we shouldn't assign you." I said, "Well, did you ever get that in writing from me? Did you ever hear that from me?" "Well, no, but Chaverini called somebody and we were told not to assign you." I said, "Yes, he has been trying to get me to convert to Civil Service, but I really haven't agreed to it yet." "Well we haven't assigned you anyway. All of the jobs are gone and there is no job for you in the Foreign Service." "Oh. Okay."

So I went back and I was really depressed by this point and thought, "Well, what am I going to do? What's going to become of me? Nobody wants me, nobody loves me, I'm just too much trouble, I guess." I was sitting there, I continued to do my job, actively pressing forward as I could on the projects. Along in there, we did the first renovation of the cafeteria. That was my project. And we did a lot of small office renovation projects. I was basically doing construction management. Then in January of that 1992, a telegram came out looking for 15 volunteers to go to the new countries of the NIS, the former Soviet Union, one of them an FS-02 GSO. Well, that was me. The other 14 were junior officer slots, to be GSOs at each of the 14 new countries. So I volunteered. Of those 15 positions, there was only one volunteer for one job, and it was me. So it went to panel, and I was assigned. By about April I was now assigned effective May 1 to the Europe Bureau to be the regional GSO for the newly independent states. On May 1 I went up to the Europe Executive Office and said, "Here I am, I'm reporting, I'm your new regional GSO." They said, "Go away, we don't want you, we don't have anything for you to do. We haven't created the office that we were supposed to create. The Undersecretary has never signed the implementing order to create this regional office that you're to be assigned to. We have no place for you to sit, we have no duties for you." I said, "Well, okay, I'll go back down to the office I just came from and continue to work. Should you find work for me, give me a call and I'll come, but incidentally I'm on your payroll effective today."

I went back downstairs and announced, "Well, I'm back." Sat down, and got back to work. A few weeks later a fellow named Louis Hebert', a retired FS personnelist, came to me and asked, "Would you be willing to go to Tbilisi as admin officer." I said, "Sure. When do you want me to go?" He said, "How quickly can you go?" I said, "Well, very quickly." It took me about a week to get a passport renewed, get a visa, some shots and that sort of thing, and I went off to be the Admin Officer in Tbilisi, the capitol of the Republic of Georgia, and it was a TDY job. It wasn't an assignment. I was still assigned as a regional GSO. I got to Tbilisi and found was the embassy was a hotel room and that we had taken a flag and an office-type flag stand, set it into the hall of the hotel, taken an embassy seal and propped it up on a chair in the hallway. And that was the American Embassy. There were a total of six people there. My hotel room had a balcony, so I had the InMarSat telephone on the balcony and became the Admin officer. It was total chaos.

Q: What was the situation like in Georgia at that time?

HELM: Georgia's birth as a republic had been very difficult. There had been major fighting, warfare, in the city, and there were at least three civil wars going on in the city at that time. I could sit out on my balcony in the evening and watch the star shells and artillery blasting away in downtown Tbilisi. Each night a company of soldiers cordoned this particular hotel. It was a very nice hotel, very modern, Swiss management, American assistant managed, incidentally. They manned machine gun positions and bunkers around the hotel all night. In the early morning hours they would disappear. It was very tense. You couldn't move around very well. During the daytime it was okay, but at dark, chaos ruled. Everybody was off the streets at night. There was a dusk to dawn curfew, you would hear a lot of gunfire every night. There was a police post just below the hotel; I could see it from my balcony. A policeman would be there with a little stick, like a piece of broomstick about a foot long, with reflective tape on it. Any car that drove along, he would wave this stick and the car was supposed to stop and he would check the papers and find out the bona fides of the driver and passengers. If a car disregarded the policeman, it would go about another 50 feet, and a .30 caliber machine gun manned by the troops would just blow it away. So you'd be asleep in the hotel room and the .30 cal would go off right below your window and kill some poor people.

Q: Work wise, how could you get anything done? It would be your particular business to go out and get local supplies and get stuff done, and it doesn't sound like a very promising atmosphere in which to work.

HELM: The first thing we had to do, that we were working hard on, was assembling a local staff. I was the second admin officer; the embassy had actually been in operation for about a month when I got there. We were mainly attempting to hire the employees of the hotel. The hotel management threatened to kick us out if we persisted in this effort. We agreed that anybody currently working for the Metechi Palace Hotel was off limits. But of course their friends and relatives weren't. So we were networking in that way as best we could, trying to hire people. Of course there was no way we could do background investigations or loyalty checks or anything like that. And there was no way that we would know whether these people were KGB (Russian language acronym for the Committee on State Security) plants or not. We just assumed they all were. We were particularly concentrating on people that spoke English, since I didn't speak a word of Russian.

We probably did have KGB in that first group, but if they could do a job, that was good enough. The ambassador one day was called by Shevardnadze and he said, "I'm coming to the hotel; you ride with me." So the ambassador went and got in Shevardnadze's car with his bodyguard and they drove to a building that had been a very large, nice house, a very ornate, private residence. Shevardnadze walked in the door and announced to a young lady sitting inside the door at a desk that he was Shevardnadze, the president of the country, and effective that minute the building was being given to the Americans and it was going to be the American embassy, and that her organization had to leave. Well, this was just the receptionist; she ran off to tell the leadership that Shevardnadze was here, taking the building. We moved in to one room on the second floor of this building. The building tenant was the Friendship Society, which was the public affairs arm of the KGB. Shevardnadze had wanted to get rid of them, and Moscow had quit paying these people, but they kept coming to work anyway. So he was using us to displace them. We never left the room on the second floor. We slept there. Somebody was always in the room. We built a tent inside the room and set up a laptop computer and an STU (secure telephone unit) telephone on an InMarSat pointed out the window. And that became our comcenter. You had to go into this tent because you didn't know if there were video lenses pointed at your screen. The only way you could be sure you could type anything on this computer was to be inside of the tent. It was hotter than hell in that tent.

We had to sleep with our equipment. At night, when the KGB people, the Friendship Society People, would go away, we would sneak out and take over another room. Throw their stuff out, then fight with them the next day. It was hilarious in a way. It was extremely tense. Because of the situation, you couldn't move go outside after dark; you had to stay in this building. It was a neat old building. It had been built by one of the generals that fought at Waterloo. One of the Russian generals was Georgian, and he stayed in Paris for ten or 15 years after the battle of Waterloo. When he came back he brought, they told me, a hundred wagon loads of stuff from Paris, loot that he had obtained, and built this fancy house. You could see it had a lot of Parisian architectural features: grand ballroom, the music room, etc. It was lovely, but it hadn't been kept up. It was filthy. It had gigantic chandeliers, but they were absolutely black. Anyway, we gathered up a group of about eight or ten Russian nationals working with us. They weren't really hired - we didn't have any personnel structure. So I sat down and wrote a personnel structure, a handbook, and everybody was paid out of the cashbox, in rubles.

When I got there the ruble was worth about 100 rubles to the dollar. When I left three months later it was about 5,000 to the dollar. We obtained permission to pay the FSNs in US dollars. We became the most popular employer in all of Georgia. Our money could be spent. I would fly up to Moscow about every two weeks and bring back a mail pouch full of US currency. You'd simply go out to the airport, fly to Moscow, go to the embassy, and they would hand you ten thousand or twenty thousand dollars in small bills. You were supposed to go to the airport by yourself, fly back to Georgia, get met by someone from the embassy - you hoped - while carrying this quantity of money. It was a recipe for getting your head busted. My first trip up there I've got \$10,000 in ones and fives. How am I going to transport this safely? I also had a shopping list of things I needed, and the biggest item on the list was cleaning supplies. We simply could not get the most basic cleaning supplies. So I went to the little embassy association store in Moscow and I bought every kind of cleaning supply I could find. I bought an iron. I had a huge mailbag full of cleaning supplies, soap and whatnot, and I put the money way down in the middle of it, and I put a padlock on it. I thought, "Anybody that steals this has got to be very strong to outrun me carrying this thing" because it must have weighed 70 pounds. I dragged this out to the airport, and got onto a Russian plane.

I don't know if you've flown Russian planes, but the seats are tiny. There's really no place below the seat to stick anything. I couldn't check the money. So I had to sit there the whole flight with this huge bag on my lap. They sold standee seats on the planes, just like the Greyhound bus; they would put as many people on the plane as would fit. I would be on the airplane with all this money. On one of these trips, I remember, I had dropped the bag. I heard something, a glass bottle down in there, break. Oh boy. There wasn't anything I could do about it. When I got to the embassy, opened it up, it was a bottle of ammonia. All my money was soaked in ammonia, but it still spent. And there was no doubt where that money came from. Nope, nope, nope.

One time I went up there. The rule was, if you went to the cashier and he handed you a broken package, you had to count every bill. But if he handed you a sealed package with the bank seals intact, you could take that without breaking it open and counting it. I went to the embassy and he handed me a stack of twenties, which was \$10,000, all sealed in plastic with seals on it. It was ten-dollar bills [sic]. I looked at the package and said, "Hey, look - this package is all broken. The bottom is all messed up." The cashier said, "Oh, you're right, take this one." So I grabbed that one and threw it in my mailbag, signed for it, and came back to the embassy in Tbilisi. I put the whole bag in the safe and opened it the next day. Looked at it, and it was 20-dollar bills. I'd signed for \$10,000 and I had taken \$20,000. I thought, I don't want to make the cashier look bad, because there was a lot of internal politics up there. I'm going to send a message back to Moscow that said, "John Helm and the twenties arrived safely."

So I sent that message off as a front channel cable and didn't hear anything of it. Nobody said anything. I went ahead and spent the money. While I was there, an FSN accountant came from Belgium, to audit me. He inspected all of my financial records, counted my money, and discovered that I had \$10,000 too much. I explained to him what had happened and he said okay, he'll take care of it, and thank you for not making a big issue of it. It would have been terribly embarrassing to this cashier in Moscow. He was a British guy, actually, Steve Wilkins. The next day he flew to Moscow and straightened it out. A few weeks later I ran out of money and went back to Moscow to get more. When I got there, the cashier took me out to the Irish Bar and bought me lunch. I said, "What's this for?" He says, "You could have kept the ten thousand. I didn't know where it was. We had no idea what had happened to that money. I thought I was going to have to pay for it out of my salary." I said, "But I sent you a message that said John Helm and the twenties. Didn't you pick up on that?" "No - THAT's why you said that. I wondered why you said that that way." "Yes, yes - but I didn't steal the money, did I? So all is well."

So there we are, six of us, running this embassy. We sent a diplomatic note over to the ministry announcing that the embassy was now in full operation, and a young man came from the foreign ministry and asked about the diplomatic note. I said, "Yeah, well this is a diplomatic note." He said, "Why did you word it this way?" "Well, that's how notes are always worded, everywhere in the world. It's part of the basic Vienna Convention diplomatic heritage that you write diplomatic notes in this rather formal way." He said, "Oh. You used different paper for the diplomatic note. You didn't use your ordinary letterhead paper." I said, "No, we have very special paper and envelopes that we use for diplomatic notes." Now we only had one package of this paper, but we did have one package. He says, "Well, what is the ministry supposed to do when we get this note?" I said, "Well, typically, the ministry will reply in some way to a note that says we received your note, or welcome to Georgia, or something. And typically there is some sort of a welcoming ceremony at the foreign ministry that the chargé¹/₂ would go to and be welcomed to the country." He says, "Oh. Is that all?" I said, "Well, most countries have some sort of a document on nice paper that they give to the chargé¹/₂ saying that they're here. What do you want to do?" He said, "Well, why don't I just tell you we got the note and thank you." I said, "Well that's fine. That's all I could ask for. Thank you." And he went away. Nice young guy, spoke good English.

Came back a week later and said, "We've gotten diplomatic i.d. cards. We sent off to Moscow and had them printed for us." "Do you have one to show me?" He says, "Yes, I do. It's here in my pocket. And there's a problem. We want to know what you think about it." He showed it to me. It was a nice little hardbound booklet i.d. card, typically used by European countries. It said Republic of Georgia, but it had the Soviet emblem. I said, "Why do you have the old Soviet seal?" "That's the only seal they had. We didn't have the mold made for our Georgian seal." I said, "Do you really think you want to issue this with the Soviet seal?" He said, "Yeah, we were questioning that. We didn't know if we wanted to or not." I said, "You know, I really wouldn't." So he went away, and then it turned out that the country had produced passports also with the Soviet seal. It was difficult, starting a country.

Q: Were we sending any people to help them do this? I was put on a USIA grant and went to Bishketo help them set up a consular service.

HELM: All of those things came later. We couldn't do it, given the security situation. We really were not able to support or protect more than we had, to the extent that we could protect ourselves. There was a fellow there who was a telecommunications specialist. Big fellow, very strong. We'd been moving the KGB out of the building, room by room, at night, and had taken over the entire second floor. But there was one room that had a grilled gate and some massive locks on it that we could not get into. One day a Russian from the Friendship Society came and asked to be let in to get into his room. We sent him away, said "No, you can't come in." He came back the next day: "You absolutely have to let me in. I have to get in my room." This time we let him in. He unlocked all the doors and went into the room, and we walked in behind him. And what he had in there was a KGB communications center with some form of a code machine, a teletype, and other gizmos. This TCU (telecommunications unit) guy and I walked behind him, and he said, "You can't be in here. This is top secret." And the telecommunications guy grabbed the nearest device he saw, some sort of electronic thing that used tubes, and ran out of the room with it.

I really wasn't expecting that, but what the hell, I'll grab something, too. So I grabbed the teletype machine. That thing was made out of cast iron. It damned near killed me. And I'm running along and realized it was still plugged in and had other wires attached. Not just to the wall, but to the machine the other fellow was carrying. I'm stumbling along carrying this thing that probably weighed a hundred pounds or more. More than I was really capable of carrying by myself. I came to the end of the wires, and they all broke. The Russian was screaming. I'll never forget: he said, "You can't treat me this way. This is not Vietnam." We ran down, still connected together, all the way to the sidewalk, and set his machines on the public sidewalk. There was a military guard at the embassy, and this guy was just approaching apoplectic, going nuts. So we went back up to his room, proceeded to clear everything out of his room, locked his locks with the doors open so he would have to work all the locks to close the room again. When we finished cleaning out his room and he was still standing there.

Q: In a way, the Cold War was over and space was far more important than things like secret equipment, which sounds like it was pretty outmoded anyway.

HELM: This fellow was quite upset at us. I think he probably told the military guard to shoot us, but since I already had the guard on my payroll, he didn't shoot. We found that spreading five dollar bills around rather frequently did wonders for making our lives better.

Q: Were there American Georgians who appeared?

HELM: There was one American Georgian that appeared. I'll get to him in a sec. I was holding one-hour classes for all the FSNs to explain American government and democracy and the diplomatic system, what diplomats are. One of the questions that came up constantly was, "Why are you here? Why had America come to Tbilisi, Georgia? What do you want from us?" And our stock answer was, "We want you to join the family of nations as a peaceful, successful country. We want you to become part of the world diplomatic and economic system." They never were sure we really meant that, but since they were on the payroll they went along with that as the official story. They were used to getting the official story.

While I was there we got a visit from the Secretary of State, Jim Baker. Here we are, this little six man embassy, and we're getting a visit by a 90 person delegation. How are we going to put on this visit? They sent me a message from the department that said, "What do you need?" And I asked for a communications officer, some security officers, and money. I said, "Send a lot of money."

K In small bills.

HELM: "Small bills. Green dollars, small bills. Send me a bunch of money." Guthrie Guilline a communications specialist, arrived from Moscow a couple of days before the visit. He came to see me and said, "Are you John Helm?" "Yes." "Can I see some i.d.?" "Well, yeah, here's my DOS building pass." "Okay, I have fifty thousand dollars in cash and a million rubles for you. Sign here." So I had my communicator and my money. There was no shortage of security officers once the plane arrived with the Secretary. In that delegation was the military commander of all of Europe, a fellow by the name of Shalikashvili. He is of Georgian decent.

Q: He was head of the American army in NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), I think.

HELM: I just figured he was the number one general in Europe, a four star general. His parents had emigrated from Georgia and he spoke some Georgian. On top of that, he was related to everybody in the country. He was the returning hero. He upstaged the Secretary at every venue. They didn't want to see Baker; they wanted to see Shalikashvili. He was a superhero. And he's the only Georgian-American that I ever saw there. There was a crowd in front of the hotel all claiming to be his relatives. We set him up in a hotel meeting room, almost like a throne room. He had a whole military delegation that traveled with him, and they were just leading people through. He would shake their hands, they would write down their name and his relationship to them. He had some kind of souvenir that he gave them, a card with his picture on it. He was giving these out until they ran out. It ran practically from dawn to dusk. When he would go to a meeting, people would simply stand there until he got back.

Q: How did you use the \$50,000 and million rubles?

HELM: I paid all the expenses, all the hotel bills, lots of rented cars, drivers. Everybody was paid in cash. Truthfully, I had so much money that I was able to run, without having to go back to Moscow, for the rest of my time there. I was there from May to August. It was a very exciting time because there was so much happening. I had a whole army of people, once I started paying in dollars. The back of the Chancery building had been a dump. Literally, it was just heaps of trash. I had laborers come in, got dump-trucks, and they hauled trash out of the back of the building for two weeks. As they dug down we discovered that we had a fireplug in the courtyard, it was paved, cobblestones, we found rooms down there that we didn't know we had, we hauled trash, trash, trash. I had eight or ten women working upstairs cleaning the ballrooms, scrubbing them. I went and bought a Russian floor polishing machine. They told me it was no good, it wouldn't last. It actually worked for a couple of weeks before it burned up. It cost \$15, or something like that. I was spending the money, doing anything I could to make the place look more like an embassy.

One thing that occurred during my period there was the fourth of July. We cleaned and we scrubbed. We got the ballrooms looking fairly good. We had no decorations, no fourth of July anything, but one of the things that had been shipped to me was an 11' by 17' American flag. The ballroom was tall enough that we were able to hang that flag vertically. That gives you an idea of the size of this place. It had about a 20-foot ceiling. You can imagine the magnitude of the room that you could do that in. We had probably 200 guests. We had the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church, we had Shevardnadze, all of the people from his government. It was amazing the number of dignitaries that appeared out of the woodwork, considering that we started from nothing. We didn't know a soul the day we arrived.

Q: Was it a problem of various forces that were engaged in this civil war trying to co-opt the embassy?

HELM: No, we were never approached by anti-Shevardnadze forces. There was no attempt to coerce us. We had no security, though. None. One day a delegation of old women dressed in black dresses showed up, and they wanted to see the chargé. The Russian militia men and our locally hired watchmen just basically got out of their way and they came in and they invaded the embassy. It was as close as we ever came to being overrun. The only room they didn't get in was our original communications room. And we were vastly outnumbered by these women. There were five or six of us, and 200 of them. "Holy mackerel, how am I going to get these women out of here, what's going to come of this?" We'd been overrun. They were everywhere, in every room.

Q: Looking at everything.

HELM: Oh yeah. And they all had pictures of their relatives who had been disappeared or had bad things happen to them during this period of civil war. I went out in the hallway through the crowd of women, and there was one that seemed to be the leader. She was holding up an 8 by 10 glossy, and it was a picture of an attractive young girl laying face up naked on a stone slab, like a morgue, and she had been disfigured. The woman was saying - I didn't know at the time but was later told - that this was her daughter who'd been taken by Shevardnadze's forces and gang raped, tortured, and murdered, and that she'd been sent a picture of her taken at the morgue. I grabbed this picture and looked at it. This was horrible. I walked down the steps carrying the picture, and the woman followed me, and all the rest of them followed her. I led the whole crowd, like the pied piper, walking and saying, "This is horrible, this is the most awful thing I've ever seen in my life," and it truly was. I walked all the way out to the street, crossed the street into a park, still holding this lady's picture. When the last of them had left the embassy following me, they locked the doors of the building. That left the embassy restored, but it left me standing in the park with this picture. Now what the hell am I going to do? So I went by the street, and here came a taxi. I had a dollar bill in my pocket, might have been a five, and I pull it out and waved it at the taxi and he stopped. I handed the woman her photograph, got in the taxi, and drove away. Went about three blocks, got out, and walked to the back door of the embassy. It pays to be crazy.

Q: It does, it does. Also, I think you got a good insight into what is known as "babushka power."

HELM: Yes. They can walk through anything. It was funny that they all followed me. They didn't steal anything, break anything, misbehave. They simply wanted somebody to see what horrors had been done to them and their families by the Shevardnadze government. Well, what can we say? We're supporting Shevardnadze. He's our host. That was one time when not speaking a word of Russian may have been the best possible thing. I spoke to them in English and said, "This is the most horrible thing I ever saw. Look at this, this is terrible." And other sympathetic noises. And was able to extract myself from the crowd and get away.

Q: You left there when?

HELM: August of '92. The whole time I was there I kept calling back to the department. Remember, I'm the guy with the InMarSat telephone. I was calling back to EUR saying, "What about my real job?" They said, "Well, we've decided to create this as a regional office in Moscow. Will you go to Moscow?" I said, "Certainly." The next week I call back and they said, "We've decided to put it in Istanbul." I said, "Great." A week later they said, "Thessaloniki, Greece." I said, "Fine, that's great, I'll move there." Every week it was a different place. Finally it was agreed that it was going to be in Frankfurt. Some time during the summer, the implementing order was done to create the New Post Support Unit. I was replaced by an Administrative Officer on permanent orders named Alan Greenfield, an excellent young officer, can't speak too highly of him. And I went off to be the regional GSO for the NIS. I came back to Washington for about two weeks, packed out, and moved to Bonn, Germany. When I got to Bonn, the good news was that they had room for us in the embassy building on the top floor. The bad news was that the top floor had been demolished for a construction project that was previously halted.

Q: Because the embassy was going to move to Berlin, was that it?

HELM: Right. So, they took me up there and said, "You can have this whole floor, but it's gutted." There was nothing there. It was a construction site, and not an especially tidy one at that. My first order of business was to get my office built. Cliff Tighe was the director. We were setting up almost an embassy admin unit in exile. We had a budget section, a personnel section, I was the GSO, we had a systems guy, and Cliff was going to be the equivalent of the admin counselor for this new post support unit. Cliff and I sat down and sketched up a little floor plan. They sent a group of people from WASHMAC, a contract construction group based in Washington - FBO operates this thing - and they built us an office in very short order. We brought some desks in from the Bonn warehouse, and while they were busy building the offices we set up shop. If the guy said, "We're going to build a wall here, you have to move your desk" I would simply drag the desk over a few feet and carry on. We got some pretty nice offices built.

The winter of '92-93 was especially difficult for the NIS posts. While I was in Georgia, one day I came out of the hotel to go for a walk, I tried to walk around during the day, see things, usually took somebody with me, a local who could tell me which parts of town to stay away from and could translate. Most of the Russian trucks were real beat up junkers. I went out there and here was a brand new European tractor-semi loaded with stuff. I tried to talk to the guys in English, to the translator in Russian; that didn't work. They seemed to speak German, so I went back inside and found the secretary of the German embassy. At that time the German embassy was also in a hotel suite. She came out and translated. It turned out that these were East German truck drivers from Rostock, or at least they worked for a company in Rostock, and they'd driven the tractor- semi all the way from Rostock to Tbilisi. We were being told that it was absolutely impossible. Overland trucking couldn't be done. Under no circumstances. And yet, here was a truck from Germany!

I wrote down all of their information and sent it off to ELSO, the European shipping office and said, "There's this beautiful truck, and here's the name of the company, their telephone number, and here's the name of the owner of the company, and they can drive stuff to Georgia. We don't have to bring it in military flights, or carry it in suitcases from Moscow." Which is how we'd been getting everything. We were truly living off the land. When I got back to the States and then moved to Bonn, the first thing was to get things shipped out to these posts, especially the posts in Central Asia. Almaty, Bishkek, Dushanbe, they were really in trouble. As well as Yerevan. Yerevan was in serious trouble.

Q: In Armenia.

HELM: We couldn't get things into those posts. They literally were living off the land. In Dushanbe it came down to the ambassador buying a cow and slaughtering it in the hotel parking lot in order for them to have meat. Through ELSO we got this trucking company. We'd been buying stuff hand over fist, and there was an office in Finland, called URSA, which had been the Moscow support office. URSA helped us get started in Bonn, and had been buying stuff for the posts. (Gerri Kamm was a young GSO in URSA and was one of the heroes of the early NIS operations). We couldn't get it to them, but we'd sat down in Washington and had written a list of everything you need for an embassy. We said, we're going to have 10-officer embassies. That means we need ten sets of office furniture, this many computers, typewriters, photo copiers, vehicles. We were going down the list, first from Washington, then from Helsinki, then from Bonn, buying all this stuff and having it delivered to ELSO. I had hundreds of tons of stuff at ELSO with no means to get it to the post. We were just buying things. There were 14 posts; we bought ten Diebold safes for each post, 140 Diebold safes. This was when the electronic lock was brand new. All this stuff, materiel, equipment, supplies. I sat down and made a list of all the expendable supplies that a post would normally have: letterhead paper, bond paper, photocopy paper, pencils, pens, forms of every sort. I ordered all that stuff. It was all being collected at ELSO. We made arrangements with the trucking company in Rostock to send a truckload to each of the new countries. It was frightfully expensive, but it was worth every penny for us. We filled up these big, (more than 40 foot long), tractor semis with the basics, and shipped it out. The trucks took off, and it was probably early November when they were leaving Antwerp to drive to Almaty. Our agreement was that they were going to leave there and drive straight through to the destinations. Well, that didn't happen.

They left and drove to Rostock and hung out there for a couple of weeks, we think. We're not really sure where they were. Then they started driving to their destinations. The truck that went to Moldova made it, the truck made it to Georgia, of course he made it to Kiev, made it to Baku. I think the truck made it to Ashgabat. But the trucks for Bishkek and Almaty - Dushanbe wasn't open at the time - got somewhere up north of the Caspian Sea and got snowed in, and with much effort were able to retreat to Volgograd, where they got snowed in. And that was the end of the line. Because of the break up of the Soviet Union, nobody was responsible to clear the snow on the highways. In all of those countries, the social services and technical services were breaking down. Everything needed for those embassies was stuck at an army base in Volgograd. We couldn't get the drivers back, we couldn't get the trucks back. That was it. I was meeting with and calling the owner of the trucking company. He was calling me. "What am I going to do? My trucks are stuck. I'm out of business until I get some trucks back." Other trucks had made it to places like Georgia, but couldn't get home. In some cases because of fighting along the way, in some cases because of weather.

So we had to work out an arrangement to pay subsistence for the drivers that were stuck out in the boondocks. Then we worked out a deal where we paid cash to a Russian colonel, and he was shuttling our stuff by air as training flights in Russian army aircraft. I'm quite sure he was pocketing the whole amount he was paid, but I got a receipt. That's all that counted. So we finally got the stuff through. But we realized then that we could not count on overland shipping. We started looking around for a means to ship stuff. We had no means of secure shipping, no way we could get any classified material, including cryptographic keying material, out to these places. The courier program refused to fly on Aeroflot - the "baby" Aeroflots; too dangerous from an aircraft falling out of the sky sense, and it was too dangerous from a control of the pouches sense. You just couldn't send even two guys with a pouch and have any assurance that it was really going to get there. So the agency was having a problem, we were having a problem, and they came to us and proposed that we become partners in the agency's aircraft. So we established a charter with a group called Rapid Air Transport.

Q: Sounds like Air America from my Vietnam days.

HELM: The same light airplane, the same blue stripe down the side, the same guys. RapAir, based out of their warehouse in Frankfurt. There were some problems. For example, all deliveries had to be made by a driver with a top secret clearance. We couldn't just send a German delivery truck to that facility. We had to help load the plane, and we had to provide a guard for the plane. And we had to pay about one third of the cost, which was three million dollars a year. But for three million dollars, we would get an L-100, which was a stretch C-130, one flight a month to each of the 14 posts. We got Europe to agree to this and to pony up 1.3 million dollars. I became the cover for the agency's plane. When I arrived in Bonn, I saw a fellow in the cafeteria my second or third day there who I had known from Somalia. His wife's a communicator, and he was a locally hired spouse; I didn't really tell you about him in the Somalia part. He became my assistant. His name was Chris Peterson, died of cancer about a year ago. A great guy, would do absolutely anything. He drove back and forth with the truck from Bonn to Frankfurt. Some days I drove the truck. Taking the stuff from ELSO to load it on the plane. ELSO would ship it to Bonn, we'd load it on our truck, and drive it into that warehouse. When we got there we would physically build the pallets, big like floor sections with netting that go across the top. There wasn't any staff of people to do this. We would have the warehouse crew in Bonn load our truck; we would physically unload the truck, build the pallets, get the netting on them. There was an Air Force Sergeant who would certify them for air transport. They would deliver them over to Rhein-Main where they would be put on the L-100. In addition to that we made an arrangement with the commissary to sell food to these posts, and we were picking that food up at the commissary.

Now the problem was that the commissary had to have someone there who could pay for the food. The Air Force would take the food off of our truck and pack it, including frozen stuff - they had boxes of Styrofoam and dry ice to pack frozen food for shipment. The commissary back door was a hundred yards from the hangar's door. The commissary wouldn't deliver it, the Air Force wouldn't pick it up, and neither party would allow us to have a German come and transport it that hundred yards on base. It was the most knuckle-headed thing I ever saw. But I had this guy Chris with a truck. He would go to the commissary, pay for the food. Individuals would give checks to Chris when he delivered the food at their post, he'd deposit those checks, then write checks and buy the food. It was the craziest system you ever saw, probably illegal as all get-out, but it worked. Chris would load the food, drive the hundred yards, unload the food, go back and get another load. He would go down, spend a day or two a month driving back and forth a hundred yards with loads of food. There were no procedures for any of this. We invented it as we went along. It may not have been the optimum, the most bureaucratically appropriate, but we got the job done. That's what mattered to us. If we didn't send it, they didn't eat it.

Q: Were you feeling the pinch that the decision was made, I'd assume by Secretary Baker, not to ask for more funds for staffing these posts?

HELM: We were aware of that, but it worked in reverse for us. When Baker didn't staff the posts very well, that was fewer mouths that we had to feed. The European bureau gave us the complete budgets for all of those posts. Later we divided it between the Baltic posts and Kiev, serviced out of Helsinki, and the Caucasus and Central Asia posts serviced out of Bonn. Basically, we had as much money as we could spend. By keeping the posts small that first couple of years - we wouldn't have survived if they'd ballooned up the way they later did. It gave us a couple of years to establish the base, if you will, before the growth occurred.

Q: Did you have much problem with the local authorities - customs, all this - or was it fairly easy once you hit a country to get the stuff to the embassy?

HELM: It's amazing what a case of Johnny Walker scotch can do in the Soviet Union. Yes, we had trouble at the outset. They wouldn't give us access, and that was a problem. We had all of these very young junior officers as GSOs at the posts. They didn't have a clue, they didn't know how to operate in the big wide world. The poor folks were just being beaten around by the local bureaucracies right and left. My solution to this was basically to pay. There is a gratuities fund, and I spread a lot of whiskey around in the former Soviet Union. The plane would land. We would go over and say, "Please send the fuel truck and sell us fuel for the aircraft." The fuel truck just wouldn't come. So you'd go over to the fuels office and find the truck driver and say, "Would you please come and fuel the airplane." The guy would just shrug his shoulders. He didn't care if he sold you fuel or didn't sell you fuel; he just didn't care. You would then say something like, "I'll give you a quart of Johnny Walker scotch if you'll come." The guy would be there instantly. And after the first time, you'd say, "Okay, now the next time we come, you got to come right out and meet us." And by golly, from that day forward he was there. Of course it cost you a bottle of scotch every time you landed. So, what's scotch cost? Not much. Not compared to the cost an extra hour of the plane sitting on the ground.

Q: It was fuel.

HELM: Well, it worked. It worked at the gatehouse, at the customs house, and after we'd done this cycle two or three times we even scaled back the "rewards." All of a sudden, after we developed a cycle that was routine, "We're going to come here every month, of course we're going to take care of you my good friend Igor," it all worked. There would be a courier on the plane who would hand the pouch to the embassy people, who were allowed to drive onto the airport right up to the back of the plane, the embassy would get a truck, we'd load the stuff for that embassy and fly to the next post. We would get a couple of posts, usually overnights in Tashkent or Almaty, and fly back through Dushanbe. That was one of the runs. They'd be on the road for three days. They'd overnight usually once in Almaty and in Istanbul on the way back. There were some fuel and air distance, and crew rest limitations so we couldn't make it all the way back to Bonn from Dushanbe without stopping.

Q: You did this for how long?

HELM: '92 to '96.

Q: Did you have anything to do with our embassy in Bonn, or did you keep out of their way and they keep out of your way?

HELM: That's exactly right. I had a lot of interaction with the warehouse guys. We had a unit there that was created on our behalf for the most part called the Excess Property Unit, which still exists. If you remember, in '92, the military was downsizing. I don't know if you ever heard the term POMCUS (pre-positioning of material configured in unit sets). Don't ask me what it means. We had huge warehouses full of stuff that were there in preparation for World War III. The National Guard was supposed to fly over and land at these remote airfields and find vehicles and every kind of equipment you could need, and drive away with it and fight World War III. One of the problems we had was that there were no vehicles, and we couldn't get them. The Department bought two cars for each of the new posts and that was all they could have; they got a sedan and a little European Ford station wagon. They couldn't keep the Fords running; they just fell apart. The posts had no utility vehicles. The new posts didn't have a truck of any sort.

I went to the army to get excess POMCUS vehicles. Margaret Colianni was a procurement specialist at RPSO Bonn. Her husband Jeff Colianni had previously been in the Army as a supply officer in Germany and had contacts and knowledge of the inner workings of the military excess property system. Jeff was a dependent spouse and was looking for work. So he proposed to set up a unit in the Regional Procurement office in Bonn (RPSO) which would go to these army DRMO (defense reutilization and marketing office) dumps, and get stuff that the State Department could use. Jeff and I went to this one POMCUS base and met with the top sergeant. We said, "Is there anything we can have?" He said, "Do you need vehicles?" We said, "Yes, that would be lovely, we need vehicles. What do you have?" He took us to an enormous warehouse. Think a building the size of a super Wal-Mart, filled, so full of vehicles that they'd had to scoot the last one in each row sideways with a forklift. From one end to the other, vehicles, pick-up trucks and Blazers. The military term is "cutvee". It's a Chevy Blazer 4x4 with military paint. Two-door, four seat SUV. All were 1985 models of Blazers and Silverados and they all had about 20 miles on the odometer.

The Sergeant asked, "How many do you want?" I said, "I'll take this row, this row and that row." He says, "Well you have to fill out these forms, and a letter, and an account number." Well, Jeff knew all about how to get the account number, and he wrote the letter. He did everything. And we got trucks. Ultimately, we got over 200 trucks from various POMCUS sites over the next couple of years. We were sending trucks all over Eastern Europe. We sent a bunch to Moscow. They came down and convoyed about 50 of them at one time. And we supplied these pick-up trucks and blazers to all of the new posts. We found a guy in Germany who would go to these sites with our letter of authorization and tow the trucks and Blazers to his shop. All of the rubber components were rotten, the tires, hoses, belts, certain mountings on the body. Everything rubber was rotten. He'd replace all that, and paint them white. They had some kind of chemical warfare coating which was a carcinogen. He had a permit from the Germans to work with this material. He would sand off this coating and paint them white or any other color you wanted, because they came camouflage. Then we were shipping them out to the posts as fast as we could. It was kind of fun calling places like Almaty and saying, "Wouldn't you like another half dozen pick up trucks?" "Oh, yes, certainly, that would be lovely, send them on." Q: You'd put them on the plane?

HELM: A few times. But mainly, we shipped them overland. By the time that was working we were over to get overland shipping working, and railroad started working for us. So were supplying all these vehicles out to the NIS. One day Jeff came to me and he says, "I've got three fully-armored Mercedes sedan, do you want them?" I said, "Sure, bring them up." So we parked them up behind the embassy in Bonn. Another time he came to me and said, "We have an Expand-o-van." I have no idea what an Expand-o-van is, but, yes, I'll take it. So I had out behind the embassy in Bonn an army five-ton truck with a box bed that would expand sideways to become a mobile tool shop, and three armored Mercedes sedans. They were in pretty rough shape.

Do you remember when Yasser Arafat came to Washington and kissed Begin on the cheek? What you didn't see was that Yasser Arafat's number one assistant handed the Secretary of State a shopping list and said, "If we're going to be good friends, you have to give me these things." The number one item on the list was an armored sedan. The Department sent a worldwide message asking if anyone had an armored sedan they could give to the Palestinians. I replied that I had three Mercedes, but they were in pretty rough condition. The response back was almost immediate: "How rough?"

There was a company in Germany, the same one that had been renovating the pick-up trucks for us, whose specialty was taking old Mercedes sedans, completely stripping them, and rebuilding them. They came from his shop as virtually new cars. I contacted him and he agreed to give me a price on the Mercedes. We took the best of the lot, sent it down to him. The windshields on all three of the cars had become fogged. This is a common problem with armored windshields over time. It came back about \$30,000 to re-do the car including \$14,000 just for the windshield. I sent that back to the Department and they sent fiscal data almost immediately to get it done. When the car was ready, Chris Petersen and I went down and picked up the car. The company was near Munich. I drove the Mercedes back to Bonn. I put the Mercedes on the Autobahn and set it at a nice 160 kilometers an hour all the way back to Bonn. The car ran great, no vibrations, steady, rock solid. It was like a new car. We used our airplane and flew the Mercedes to Tel Aviv, and it became Yasser Arafat's car. A month or so later I saw on CNN (cable network news) where Arafat was arriving at some meeting, and I recognized the car.

[Narrative breaks off, then resumes]

Q: Today is the 15th of September, 2004.

HELM: Let's go back to Ecuador. I want to tell you that every person in the general services field has one or two stories about their own DCM's "wife from hell." I sort of want to tell you a little of mine. Shortly after I arrived in Quito, the new DCM arrived. The DCM's house was an older house, only about two or three blocks from the embassy, perfect location. But it was on a fairly noisy street. The DCM and his wife moved in, and the complaints started almost immediately. "There's too much noise on the main street in front of the house. We have to have soundproof windows." I'd never been hit with a requirement for soundproof windows. I went back to Washington and asked about them. It went back and forth, and finally I was told to put storm windows into the house, that would help the sound. I put the storm windows into the house. They called me and said, "We can still hear the street noise." I went over there and stood there, and quite frankly, I could barely hear anything. "The street's way too noisy. But it's not noisy when you're here, it's noisy only at night." So I went by there and stood on the street one Friday night at about 11 o'clock, when, if there was ever going to be noise - there wasn't a car on the street; absolutely empty. A city bus came through about every 15 minutes, and that was it. Still too noisy.

Then I get a call, "The silver is missing. Someone has stolen two place settings of official silver." We went over the inventories of the silver, and sure enough, two place settings had disappeared. Then, there were bugs. "There's bugs in the house. We have to do something about the insects." We had a fumigator go and fumigate the house. "There's still bugs in the house; your fumigator is no good." I sent him back. He fumigated the place again. The next day, "There's still bugs in the house. There's a cockroach in the kitchen." Well it's Quito, Ecuador, for God's sakes. I sent the fumigator back; this time he came and reported that no bugs could live in that house. Two days later I'm called up to the DCM's office and chewed out for half an hour, absolutely attacked. I'm told, "If you don't get those bugs out of my house, that's the end of your career. That's it."

Madame DCM wanted to redecorate the place and she wanted new carpeting. We went back to the Department and asked the interior design people at FBO to provide money. They not only did that, but recommended the carpeting we should buy. They furnished the house and had color samples of everything. So we got the money and I was ready to buy the carpet and Mrs. DCM stopped me. "No, you can't buy that carpet. I'm going to buy it from this local fellow." "Oh, okay. buy it locally if you insist." "We're not buying that color." "What are you buying, what have you ordered?" "I've already ordered it, and the man's coming next week and he's just going to send you the bill." I went along with it, probably shouldn't have, but how many times can you have your career threatened by the DCM? The carpet came and it was a long shag, pure polar white, in Quito, Ecuador, not a particularly clean city. It was installed. Then the walls had to be painted. We got the paint, Sherwin Williams, US paint. The painter came and prepared the colors, got everything just right, and started putting it on. It was not the right color. This part of the wall did not match that part of the wall, even though the paint had come from the same bucket, and the bucket was well stirred and properly prepared. So we painted the wall with the bottom half of the bucket, to try to get it to match. I never could see a difference, the painter couldn't, nobody else could, but she could see the difference. We must have painted that wall ten times until she was satisfied or just gave up.

Everything I did was wrong. And then, more silver was stolen: two more place settings. It was the servants - well, fire the servants. "Can I talk to the servants?" "No, you cannot talk to the servants. I'll talk to the servants." There had been a problem and we did not have a regional security officer at the post. I was the acting post security officer. "This is twice you've had a theft of silver at your house. We're going to have to talk to people." "No, no. You can't talk to anybody. But I know it was Maria who stole the silver." I've made up Maria's name; it was the head servant. I filed the report that more silver had been stolen, and sent it off. Somebody's going to have to help me with memory, but the American ambassador to Columbia was kidnapped or held hostage.

Q: Yes, Diego Asencio.

HELM: That was during the time Diego Asencio was being held hostage. The regional security officer in Bogota was supposed to be supporting me. But he was busy. In fact, nothing that I wrote during that period of time was reacted to. They were just too busy trying to deal with this hostage crisis. It was one thing after another. Nothing was ever right.

Now on a different track, at the ambassador's residence, IDF was also redecorating the ambassador's residence. They were ordering furniture, carpet, curtains, and it was all being manufactured in the States and sent down. We were going to be sent detailed instructions on exactly how to place this furniture in the residence. The furniture had started to come in. Time passed, and at the mid-point of the tour I went on R and R (rest and recuperation) for two weeks. When I get back, I find that the DCM has gone and leased himself a new house. I said, "How did you do that?" He says, "In your absence, I was the contracting officer, so I signed a lease." Fine. Except that he was paying considerably more for the house than the house next door, which we had leased. Furthermore, the owner of the house was a fellow he played cards with regularly. Not precisely an arms' length contract.

I was at some function and Mrs. DCM came up to me and said, "John, there's more silver missing. There's two more place settings missing. And serving pieces as well." So I left the function and went up to the DCM's house and found the servant lady who I'd referred to as Maria, and I started questioning her. She was denying having stolen the silver. They came home and found me there, and they were very upset that I was at their house questioning the servants about the silver. I kept persisting with this particular servant, and she became very emotional. She was crying out "[unintelligible] stolen the silver." I was basically telling her I was going to go to the police and have her arrested for stealing the silver. She wouldn't tell me anything about the silver, what was happening to it, except she hadn't stolen it. That poor lady had worked in that house for probably 20 plus years. There had never been a theft before. That same silver had been in that house for years, and she was crying out very loudly. It was just a horrible, abusive thing that I was doing. The DCM comes down and says, "I found the silver. All the silver that was missing, at least the last two place settings and serving pieces. I found them." "Well where were they?" "They were in the locked closet." "So the servant stole the silver and hid it in your locked closet?" The servant said, "I don't have a key to the locked closet. I can't get in there, I've never seen inside the closet. They have the only key." She got away with service for four, but she didn't get the serving pieces or service for six. I am convinced that Mrs. DCM was stealing the silver.

Q: The DCM's wife was.

HELM: The lease was crooked. Everything about this gentleman was crooked.

Q: How about inspectors. Did they come snooping around?

HELM: No, the inspectors never came.

Q: Who was ambassador?

HELM: Ray Gonzalez was the ambassador. I wasn't going to him with all this petty stuff, and he wasn't going to... Finally, my tour is ending and I just can't wait to get out of that place. This guy was driving me nuts, him and his wife. I've always felt that one of the reasons my career didn't go higher than it did was the horrible efficiency report that he wrote. I never really challenged it. I never grieved it. I probably should have, but I just wanted to leave it behind and get out of there.

There was one more incident with the DCM and Mrs. DCM just as I was leaving post.

New furniture has been ordered for the Ambassador's Residence and the last few items arrived my last week at post. It had been agreed that we would hold the Ambassador's new furniture at the warehouse until all of it arrived and it could be installed at one time. My replacement had arrived and I had a few days of overlap with him. I had moved out of the GSO office and was sitting at an extra desk in the FSN office.

My last day at post I walks Mrs. DCM to him and said, "Take me immediately to the warehouse. I want to see what's there." I couldn't say a thing. I just sat silent as this fellow was forced to go in the DCM's car and escort her to visit the warehouse.

She went in and discovered that I'd been holding out on her, that there was all sorts of beautiful furniture, that she claimed for herself and demanded it delivered that day to her residence. She had it all hauled out to her house and put in her living room.

About a month later a friend from the post was through Washington and I had lunch with him. He said, "You'll never guess what happened. All the furniture for the ambassador's redecoration was hauled to the DCM's house and set into the living room. A couple of weeks later after you'd left, Mrs. Ambassador called and said 'I'm ready to put in the furniture now' and the warehouse guys didn't really know what to say. So they put her off and said they would be looking for it but couldn't bring it right that minute. Mrs. Ambassador spoke native Spanish and called directly to the FSNs. They didn't want to say what they had done with the furniture. She was becoming somewhat upset that it didn't seem to be anywhere. She went to a reception at the DCM's house that evening, and Mrs. DCM said 'Look at this beautiful furniture that that SOB Helm wouldn't let me have, was holding out on me, and I went to the warehouse and I took it.'"

Of course, it was immediately moved to the Ambassador's residence.

Q: Did you follow the career of the DCM later on?

HELM: Yes I did. I don't want to be too biographic; I believe the gentleman is still alive. He never made ambassador, but he did get a prestigious job as the official representative to the world's fair or the Olympics, something of that nature. I ran into him once. I got on the metro at Pentagon and he got also got on. He looked back. The car wasn't crowded, it wasn't rush hour. I looked at him, he looked at me, and he got off at the next stop. I assume he had business at the next stop, but I'd like to think he looked at me and was wondering if I was going to come up and stab him. (Laughter) So much for that story.

A general services officer gets into all sorts of issues that are not exactly in anybody's job description. I got called one night, probably 6 o'clock, when I was in El Salvador, that a child had drowned in the swimming pool. Come quick. So, I went over to the house and sure enough the child had drowned. Luckily, it was a house that we had identified as requiring a fence around the swimming pool. We put the right fence, and the right kind of latch. But there were six children in the family, the smallest 18 months, the largest high school. The husband was on TDY out of the country and the wife was trying to manage all of these kids, and one of the children had left the gate to the pool open. The little toddler had gone in, followed him, and drowned.

Q: How sad.

HELM: There was a Facilities Manager (Post Safety Officer) who was dealing with the official accident report. My job was to deal with the authorities. The body of this child, it looked like a large doll, a beautiful little girl, was lying on the kitchen counter. The mother was in the living room and the other children had been taken to friends houses. It was horrible. People were coming, trying to console the mother. I had to stay and wait on the medical examiner who took hours to get there. I had to sit down with the medical examiner and go over all the details of what happened. I had to file the official Salvadorian report of death. And then it was decided because it was a death under questionable circumstances, there had to be an autopsy. So I was the one that had to go deal with letting people know. By this point, the Ambassador was there. Ann Patterson, the best ambassador I ever worked under. The Medical Examiner took the body and called me about 3 am. I had to go down to the oldest, very worst part of the city, to the public morgue. I had to make arrangements to pay for the services of the funeral home. It was one of the strangest encounters of my life, going down to this morgue in the middle of the night in the absolute pits of the slums of El Salvador, to claim this body and get it up to the funeral home. That's an example of some of the strange things you get into.

Q: You went to El Salvador after Ecuador?

HELM: Actually, it was late in my career. It was after Bonn.

Q: Bonn must have been a major job.

HELM: Well it was. Trying to establish the new posts. I really had nothing to do with Germany. My work was in the new posts, traveling out to them, trying to help get them set up. One time I went to Yerevan, the capitol of Armenia, and they were having a problem with general services staffing. FBO had had a project there and got all these laborers hired, and they had been paying them out of the cashbox at a daily rate. When the project ended, the laborers kept coming to work, hanging around the embassy expecting to be paid. The general services officer and the administrative officer didn't know how to stop it. The guys just kept coming, hanging around, doing odd jobs around the place. There were lots of them. I went down there and they said, "What are we going to do about all these extra people?" I said, "Well, has anyone told them to quit coming?" "No, we don't want to upset them." I got them all and said, "Quit coming. The job's over. You're all finished." I instantly fired about 30 people. I said, "Go to the cashier, get any money your due for hanging around here up until today, we'll pay you for the whole day, but go home and don't come back." They had little embassy i.d. cards that had been made up. I took away all their i.d. cards. It was winter. It gets dark in Yerevan. There are no street lights. I was walking across the park at about 7 o'clock at night, it was pitch dark, thinking about all the 30 guys I had just fired, wondering if I was going to make it all the way to the hotel.

By '95 the posts in the Newly Independent States were pretty much on their feet. They were growing like Topsy. Many had new buildings, or their buildings had been improved. Trucking had been improved. I was ready to shut down the office and leave. The European Bureau came to me and asked me to stay on, primarily for Sarajevo. They wanted me to shift all my efforts and get Sarajevo going. The war was just winding down. This was before the Dayton accords, but shortly before. I guess they were already meeting at Wright Patterson. They asked me to stay on in Germany for a year and get that post off the ground. One of the problems they had was vehicles. They didn't have enough vehicles in Sarajevo. A couple of Officers had recently gone into Sarajevo via Mt. Egmont and they wanted to move a lot more people in. They wanted to build the embassy up rather quickly, because of the pending military buildup.

We'd obtained an old five ton army truck. I loaded the thing full of every kind of supply you could imagine. Two Bosnian guys had driven it in over Mt. Egmont. So that truck was at the embassy. The day the first plane loads of the military arrived, they unloaded a couple of humvees and drove into the embassy, because the embassy had been established and operating there on an extremely minimal level. The first thing they wanted was our truck. They said, "That's an army truck. It's ours. We're taking it." We said, "No, it's not yours, we got it fair and square from DRMO and you can't take it, but we'll rent it to you." "Well we can't just rent the truck." They negotiated back and forth, and in exchange for the use of our truck they promised to give the embassy APO (Army Post Office) service. That was a tremendous help. So we provided the army with the truck to bring the initial contingent in from the airport. Some invasion!

Clinton decided that he was going to fly in, and wanted to go visit a week after the Dayton accords. The place was dangerous as all get-out. There was still shooting. The military was just arriving, and it was not a good place. So Rosemary Hanson and I and some other people went down to Frankfurt and got on a White House C-141 and flew into Sarajevo. This is when planes were still getting shot up. As we flew in, the air force came through the plane and insisted that everyone put on a flak jacket and a helmet. That's fine - except, what you ought to be doing with a flak jacket is sitting on it. So we all put on this body armor, the plane landed, and we all started to get off. The plane was full of White House advance staff. A lot of them were volunteers, a lot were college students. I'll never forget. We landed and started to get off the plane and the air force took back all their helmets and flak jackets. "That's just for use on the airplane. You don't need it in town." A couple of army guys were directing us over to this one little makeshift office, a trailer type thing with sandbags stacked on it. We got there and they counted heads and came up one short. Somebody is missing. They went back outside and they found one young fellow, probably a college student or a recent graduate, and said, "Hey, what are you doing over there in the grass?" "Well, I really had to go pee, so I ran over here behind this tree." "Oh, okay, that's good; we haven't checked that spot for mines yet. But we have a pretty good idea there's no anti-personnel mines on the path you walked in and out of." The fellow didn't feel real good about that.

Q: I was an election observer shortly thereafter, and we were told, all of us observers, "If you have to relieve yourself, do it on the road. Do not step off the verge. Don't be embarrassed, just do it on the road. Do not get off the roads. We don't know if there are mines there or not."

HELM: On one of my visits I was introduced to an FSN at the Embassy who had been recently hired as the Procurement Clerk. I said, "Oh, great. They've got somebody, there's a staff to work with." She didn't seem to understand a lot. She spoke a little English. I looked around the office and there was a purchase order form, the most common form for general services officers. I held it up and said, "Have you ever seen one of these?" "No, what's that, never seen one of those before." Oh boy. So we started trying to train staff, to build up their establishment. They needed vehicles in a hurry. When I got back to Bonn, I started writing cables, getting permissions and whatnot. It ended up we found a stock of Toyota Land Cruisers sitting at a port in Algeciras, Spain, for shipment to someplace in Africa. I was able to get six of those cars shipped into Germany. We brought a company in from San Angelo, Texas and they armored the cars right there in the embassy garage in Bonn. Then Three of us, Charles Poli, Blue Blaze - his real name was, Joseph Blaise and I drove the cars to Sarajevo. Charles was a locally hired spouse but he is now a foreign service officer, in Hanoi most recently but I'm not sure where he is now. Blue just retired recently. The three of us drove the cars into Sarajevo.

We got to Zagreb and were told we couldn't cross the pontoon bridge. Remember, the army had established a pontoon bridge. They said they had just reopened the highway bridge, to go twenty miles up the road to cross the highway bridge. So we did. We were the first civilians to cross the bridge. It was pretty shaky. It was an old iron bridge, and the approaches had been blown away. They brought up bailey bridge sections to make new approaches. One Land Cruiser at a time drove across the bridge. They told you to keep your window open, but we had armored cars so we couldn't keep the window open. They said, "Keep the driver's door unlatched so if the bridge goes down and you go in the water, you have a way to get out. (Maybe). And don't wear your seatbelt." So one by one we crossed the bridge at about a half a mile an hour.

We headed down towards Sarajevo, and we came to one of the places in the internal frontlines between the two sides. I guess we were in Bosnian territory and we crossed to Serbian territory, then later we crossed into Bosnian territory again. Anyway, we got some distance down and there was a bridge with hole in it, right smack in the middle of the bridge. It was a two-lane bridge with about an eight foot diameter hole in it. There were some army guys there, and they said, "Yes, yes, you can go around the hole. If you'll get your wheels up on the sidewalk and scrape the rail, your wheels will just make it around the hole." So we got around that obstacle. Then we got farther down. There was a spot where the army had laid big steel angles across the road. They had two tanks, one facing north, one facing south, and a bunker with machine guns facing north and south. They didn't know which side was going to come and get 'em, so they were ready for both directions. Usually the bad guys are on one side and the good guys are behind you, but not in Bosnia. We got across that and got to town about dark. The cars were absolutely packed. We couldn't have put another thing in those cars. It was everything they needed for the embassy. The next day we went out to the airport and hung around until we were able to basically hitch hike on a Russian C-130 back to Zagreb. Went off back to Bonn, picked up more cars and drove them in. After I left, the other two guys made another run with more cars. Keeping Bosnia supplied was a real task.

Q: Did you have problems establishing a proper administrative apparatus in the embassy
Getting staffing, people who knew what they were doing?

HELM: What would happen at these new embassies, all of them including Sarajevo, they'd send a staff in from Washington. Usually six people. One would be the chargé d'affaires, there'd be an admin guy, an agency guy, two communicators and a secretary or clerk. That was the initial package. Then a general services officer would be put in. But they didn't have anything except the items carried in, in a suitcase. They'd carry in a flag, a folding dismountable flagpole. They'd set that up in the hallway of a hotel, and that that room would become the embassy. But they needed everything. You name it, they needed it. In some cases it was as basic as foodstuffs. Everything that differentiates between an operating U.S.- style office and a guy sitting in a hut in the third world had to be gotten in there somehow or another. Not in large quantities, but urgently. The key was to get it moving and get the supplies they needed on a just-in-time basis, and keep it flowing.

Q: Were there problems getting people, particularly on your side, the GSOs or admin people, to go to these places?

HELM: They had issued a volunteer letter, a call for volunteers to go to the NIS for 15 positions. One to be the regional guy, and I had volunteered. And 14 at junior levels to go be GSOs. They had zero volunteers for the 14 positions. They went to the junior officer class at FSI and said, "Okay, everybody from this row over is going to the NIS as a GSO. Everybody from this row this way is going to the NIS as a political officer." Without regard to knowledge, skills, or abilities. They shipped them out. Some of them worked out very well. Some were very practical people. A few of them did not work out well. One fellow arrived at post, stayed a couple of weeks. We contacted him and said, "You're household effects are in Antwerp, we'll try to get them to you as quickly as we can." He came back with a message that said, "Send the household effects to a certain dormitory room at the University of Virginia law school," and promptly got on the plane and left. Left not only the country, but the foreign service. There were several cases of that. A couple of cases of people getting out there and being psychologically unsuited, and having to be pulled out of post.

Q: It reminds me very much of when I was in Vietnam. We sent people out as province advisors or assistant province advisors. It was a very good training ground, but those that didn't make it - it was a good way to weed people out.

HELM: My role was to be the mentor for all of these young officers. In the NIS there was no effective telephone system. The old Soviet telephone system just didn't work in most places to the west. But they had telex, and that's how the Soviets themselves had communicated. Those old teletype machines. So I bought a teletype machine. It was dirt cheap to communicate between Germany and the Soviet Union, or within the former Soviet Union, from the telex. You can have a two-way conversation on a telex. So, I had it in my office and they would call me, and we would have conversations. I had a running correspondence, almost daily with some of them, "How do I do this? How do I do that? Can you get this for me? Can you get that for me? Can you intervene with the ambassador, with this person or that person, and see if we can negotiate something here." So I was doing a lot of that, almost on a daily basis. I've stayed in touch with several of them. Some have gone on, made career officers now, and probably are going to make ambassador.

Q: You left Bonn in '96. Where did you go?

HELM: I went to El Salvador, general services officer. An established post. It was just line GSO work.Q: Was that the post that they turned into - people talked about the fortress that was built there.

HELM: Going back to my FBO days. There were two posts that were being built simultaneously by the same company and the same architect: Somalia, and El Salvador. They were both going to be fortresses. More than fortresses; virtual land ships, self-contained, with enough fuel and generators, their own water wells and purification systems. They were virtually independent of the infrastructure of the country. I'd gone to Mogadishu during construction and by happenstance went to El Salvador. When it was built, the civil war was on, it was an extremely dangerous place. There were lots and lots of people in the embassy because the U.S. government at that time was virtually running the war. Another agency had two whole floors of the embassy building filled with their people. They, by the time I got there, had drawn down to a total staff of one fellow, at least that they'd admit. I knew who he was. I didn't like the guy. I found him terribly arrogant and obnoxious. Walter, I can say that because I helped ship his body home, so it's not like I'm revealing anything current. He was announced in the sense that he was not a "secret agent."

Walter, one evening went home and was with his girlfriend. They had pizza for dinner and then some time about two in the morning, Walter had a massive heart attack and died. It turned out that the girlfriend was associated with the Salvadoran intelligence service in some way. First I'm trying to deal with the body, and the funeral home - middle of the night stuff again. Then it turns out nobody can find Walter's handgun. I went over and started searching through his apartment trying to find the gun. Can't find the gun. Well it's our household furniture, and I cannot issue this furniture to some other family with a revolver buried in it somewhere. So we took all the furniture out of the apartment, over to the embassy, and ran it through the x-ray machine. No gun. Never found it. Gave up the lease, reissued the furniture. But the funny part of this was that the ambassador called me and said, "We're going to have to do something for Walter, have some sort of a funeral or memorial service." I said, "Well, why don't we just put him on the plane and ship him out of here." "No, we have to have some kind of service because it won't look right if we don't." There were local political considerations. He had a lot of contacts. And so I was put in the position of arranging the funeral for this fellow I really didn't care for, trying to gather up people to come to Walter's funeral and look sufficiently upset about his passing. We got a crowd together, a number of Salvadoran contacts - people who wouldn't sign the visitors' book - came through and paid their last respects to poor old Walter. The mistress took the place of the grieving widow. There was also a grieving widow in the U.S., but we won't mention that. It was sort of a strange thing, but we got through that, packed Walter up and shipped him out.

Q: Here you are a GSO. The war is over, El Salvador is now ranked in interest of the United States around 150th in order of priority, and you've got this white elephant of an embassy. What happened?

HELM: First thing we did was reduce our overhead a bit. We had a 26-acre compound. Two whole buildings. There were other offices in town. The Department of Agriculture had a small office. We brought them into occupy some of the space. There was a regional anti-narcotics office that was looking for a home, and we brought them in. We brought in a regional immigration office. Bit by bit we pretty much filled up the place by picking up some regional offices and closing down some things. But you're wrong about America's interest in El Salvador. You see, you have to remember that the second largest Salvadoran city is Los Angeles, California. Salvadorians can walk here, and did in great numbers. While our intelligence and military interest was going down, our consular and immigration interest was going up. Bit by bit we simply substituted intelligence officers for visa officers. The visa situation down there, the U.S. immigration policies: they were granted a special dispensation during the war for people who were political refugees to come up here, and they did so by the tens of thousands. In fact, if you took the Salvadorian out of the D.C. metropolitan area, I don't think there's a hotel or restaurant that could survive.

Q: As well as construction site.

HELM: Seventy percent of the people working on my construction job at old State are Latino. I speak Spanish, and I get along with them just fine. Whenever I see them, I say, "I went to the State Department, I speak Spanish, but I have nothing to do with visas."

One time the computer for the consular section, the visa department, burned out. It almost caused another revolution in the country. We had a couple of thousand people camped out on the street around the embassy. There had been some little tiff between Salvador and the U.S. over some little extradition treaty we wanted them to sign, and they didn't especially want to do it. The Salvadoran government decided that the Americans had quit issuing visas because of this extradition treaty. The computer burning out had significant political overtones, to the point that all these people were lined up around the embassy for days. My Gardeners came in and said, "We can't clean the shrubbery. People are going to the bathroom in the shrubbery and it's just too dirty. We don't want to be gardeners there any more." So I was renting port-a-potties to put on the sidewalk for the visa applicants. We called Washington and said, "Okay, when you put in this new visa system you said you were going have hot spares ready to go. Well, send down the new server, because this one's burned out." People in Washington said, "We don't have any servers ready to go. We have to go and buy one. What kind did you say you had?" I said, "You don't know?" "No, but it's a centrally controlled item and you can't do anything but we don't have one." One of the FSNs was a brilliant young man. He went down to a computer store, bought some parts, came back and fixed the computer. We never did get it fixed from Washington.

Q: I would have thought that this embassy would have been high cost maintenance because of the self-contained type thing. How did you find that?

HELM: Surprising enough, it wasn't, because it was efficiently built. Yes, we had a lot of infrastructure, but it was relatively new, and it worked. It had been taken care of. So, no, our maintenance and utility costs were in line with what you'd expect.

Q: When you left El Salvador -HELM: That's when I came back to Washington.

Q: For good?

HELM: Well, I came back, I had about a year left in my "time in class." During my career, they changed the rules on time in class. Several different versions were in power at different times. I came in at age 22. They decided that you were going to get a 27-year career, which meant that they were going to force me to retire at age 49.

Q: Just before qualifying for retirement.

HELM: Exactly. So I filed a letter with the director general and pleaded my case, and was given dispensation to stay on until the last day of the month I turned 50. Well, as luck would have it, it crossed the fiscal year line, so I filed more paper and was granted another nine months until the last day of September. My birthday's in December. On September 30, 2001, I retired. About three months before my retirement, I'd gone in to see the people I was working for. I said, "Well, they're kicking me out of the Foreign Service, sayonara." They said, "Well who's going to do your job?" "That's your problem. The Foreign Service is TICing (time-in-class) me out" They said, "Well, you've been on this project from the first." I was there on that project from '88 to '92, and then came back in '99. But during that seven year period when I was out, they had rebuilt Columbia Plaza and gotten funded for the old State project. Basically, nothing had happened. The same memos that I had put in the files in '92 were being dragged out and having the dust blown off of them in '99. The plans we'd rolled up on the shelf in '92 we pulled back out in '99 and started building. Consequently, they didn't have anyone. Certainly no one that knew the project, and they couldn't fill the slot. So it put me in a unique position. "Would you come back as a contractor?" I said, "Certainly." And so I went to the, the transition course at FSI for the month of August, 2001. In the month of September you are supposed to be off looking for a job, the second 30 days of the 60 day program. So I was doing the second 30 days trying to figure out how to get myself hired back as a contractor. Through contacts I made at the transition program, I found a company that had a contract, that could hire me. Well as luck would have it, September 11th the World Trade Center and the Pentagon get hit. For some reason some reporter reported back to one of the major networks that there had been a car bombing at the State Department.

Q: I recall that. I had just been in front of the State Department at the time. I was listening to the radio in my earphones and I thought, "What car bomb is this?"

HELM: Let me tell you what really happened. The guards have radios, and the guards have a set of pre-arranged responses to things. They didn't have a pre-arranged response for an attack on the World Trade Center or the Pentagon, but they did have a response for a car bomb. So they told the guards on the guards radios - sometimes you can hear them if you're standing near the guard - to respond as if it were a car bomb, because that was the closest correct response sequence. Once the guards knew that, they could go and do what they were supposed to do. Well I was sitting there watching the whole thing unfold on television. I've never seen three thousand people die on my television before. When the car bomb went off, I tried to call down to the State Department, and of course no one answered. So that really scared me. The next day they called me and said, " We know what you're going to be doing. Get your butt down here and get to work. We're convening a meeting this morning on how to defend Main State against attack." So I came down to Main State, reported to work the next day, and went into the meeting. Back in '92 I had done a study of the ability of Main State to resist a truck bomb, various sized bombs. Of all the people in the room, I was the only one that had any knowledge of how the building would react in an attack.

So they turned to me and said, "We want to put blast resistant windows in the building. How much is it going to cost?" They put me on the spot. I hadn't thought about that. How many windows are there in Main State? But being me, I reached into the air and said, "60 million dollars." Didn't have a clue. Doggone if it didn't show up that we were given 60 million dollars for blast windows. When the money came to Main State, the finance people said, "Well, you certainly can't spend 60 million dollars on blast windows today, so we'll take 30 of it." I incorporated blast windows into the old State project. It cost about 15 million to put blast windows into old State. They're lovely. I'm very proud of them.

Q: You've been involved in the renovation of what we call old State, which was the old War Department at one point. Something near and dear to my heart was the diplomacy center, sort of a museum. Did you have much of a problem with that?

HELM: I never had a problem with it. The first time I heard of it I had a little trouble getting over the intellectual concept of State trying to do some effective outreach after all these years of doing virtually nothing. Then it became a practical issue of what space do we allocate, how do we handle visitors, traffic, security, what infrastructure are we going to require. I had a project all ready underway. We identified a space and I had minimal air conditioning put in so it wouldn't turn green in the interim, because I know that we're going to change in the space before the museum gets there. Basically we'd just drawn a box on the plans for the museum. Practically everything we do now has to be sensitive to the future needs of the museum. We're working on it. I think it's going to be a lovely facility.

Q: As you do these things, we've gone through an earth change, that is, electronic connections for computers, internet and all of this. Have you found that this creates challenges?

HELM: It simply stands the concept of planning on its ear. The first thing you plan for in a building today is your computer infrastructure. Once you get the computers set, you work the people in around them.

Q: It shows you it's taking over.

HELM: Absolutely. And they want more. Every day they come and seem to want more. We've built such a robust infrastructure, fantastically expensive, that we feel we've met all of their needs for the next 20 or 30 years. That includes fiber optic connections to the desktop at every desk, CAT6 wiring to every desk in addition to telephones, video, we have it all. It's all built in. Twenty six specialized air conditioned wiring closets, a 7,000 square foot computer room, a new 750,000 watt ups, two 1600 watt generators. The generators are the size of locomotives. All for the infrastructure, for the telephones and computers. This new museum is going to be massively electronic. One of the problems with diplomacy is that we don't have a lot of really sexy artifacts. You can throw a bunch of old treaties in a display case, you can put some medals and some pictures around, but those sorts of things do not get people's attention. So we're going to have to go interactive, we're going to have to go electronic.

There can't be a lot of diplomatic history, because for your average museum goer, especially in this town, they've seen all the old stuff they want to see. We're going to have to be current, and that means being able to offer insights on today's problems. In other words, use the resources of the museum to educate the museum goer. Not on what we did in the 1700s or the 1800s, but today. What's happening In Iraq? What is the political situation in Afghanistan, Sudan or any other country? It is going to mean getting the State Department desk officers, assistant secretaries, deputy assistant secretaries down to the working levels to agree to be interviewed on camera, from their desks. Someone comes in, this person can be called on to take five minutes and give them a briefing on what's happening in Italy today. What are the issues for his country, his area of interest, be it conflict diamonds, gold smuggling, energy in the Caspian Basin, bilateral issues, global warming. Whatever the issue, to be able to call on people to answer questions or to present small presentations through this museum.

Q: It's quite an undertaking.

End of interview